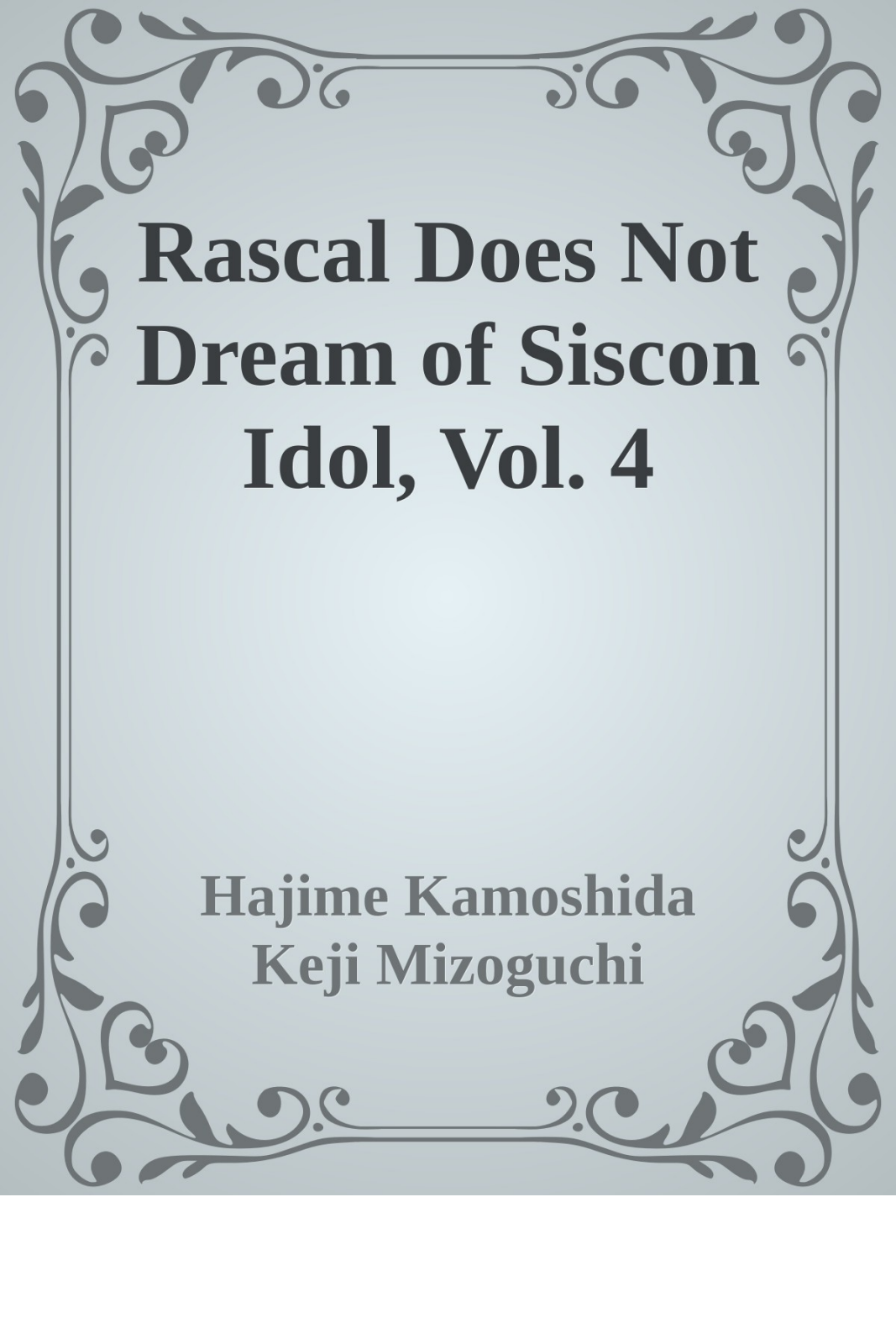


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Rascal Does Not Dream of Sicon Idol, Vol. 4

**Hajime Kamoshida
Keji Mizoguchi**

VISIT...

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Rascal DOES NOT DREAM of Siscon Idol

Hajime
kamoshida

Illustration by
KEJI MIZOGUCHI



Rascal DOES NOT DREAM of Siscon Idol



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Chapter 1 Sister Panic

Chapter 2 The Cold War Commences

Chapter 3 It's Not a Sister Complex

Chapter 4 Complex Congratulations

Last Chapter And the Fall Brings...

Mai Sakurajima

“When I’m acting, I really feel alive.”

—After a two-year silence, you’re back to acting! How does it feel to be working again?

I just love being on set. When I’m with the director, crew, and the other actors, all of us working to create something—not to be dramatic—but those are the moments I really feel like I’m alive. Not that I was dead while I was on hiatus. *(Laughs.)* The time I spent away from work was important, too. It gave me a chance to think about who I am... I started acting when I was a child, and ever since then, I’ve been so focused on getting my roles perfect that I feel like I never realized how much I love the job until I took time off.

—What led to your decision to return to work?

The whole time I was on hiatus, I kept thinking about coming back. I thought I was hiding it, but apparently I wasn’t fooling anyone. *(Laughs.)* When someone finally clued me in, I realized I was being stubborn for no reason and decided it was time.

—So it was all on the spur of the moment?

Absolutely. But I think that’s how it was supposed to be. It was like everything that had been tangled up inside suddenly sorted itself out.

PROFILE

From Kanagawa. Blood type is AB. Made her debut at the age of six on the morning soap *Kokonoe*. Has starred in commercials, TV series, and movies, and has done modeling work. This spring, she’ll be starring in the movie *Haru’s Future*, her first lead role since returning to work.



NODOKA TOYOHAMA!

**SWEET
AND
FRESH,
SHE'S THE
ULTIMATE
WEAPON!**

I'll shoot
you right in
the heart!



The most
fashionable
member
of the
idol group
**Sweet
Bullet!**

Her first
swimsuit
shoot!

PROFILE

Born March 14
From Tokyo. Blood type A. 158 cm.
Nickname: Doka
Specialty: Quick change
Favorite thing: Mai Sakurajima
New single "Rainbow Bullet"
on sale now



Hajime kamoshida

Illustration by
keji mizoguchi


New York

Copyright

Rascal Does Not Dream of Siscon Idol
Hajime Kamoshida

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Afterword

Yen Newsletter

That day, Sakuta Azusagawa was thinking only one thing.

Not again.



sister panic

1

The scene on his TV screen was bathed in the strobing light of camera flashes.

“I apologize for the commotion I’ve caused.”

The speaker was a former idol, a married woman who’d been caught in an affair with a young male model.

She bowed her head low and kept it there for a full ten seconds.

When she finally raised her head, her tiny frame was again assailed by a volley of flashes and shutter clicks.

Absently watching this play out, Sakuta Azusagawa thought, *Being famous sucks*.

People were having affairs or cheating on loved ones all over Japan. But none of them were forced to air their shame on network television. None of them found themselves with words like *man-eater*, *slut*, or *nympho* hurled at them like stones.

The woman on-screen responded to the reporters haltingly, not once looking directly at the camera. Once it was over, she bowed again and repeated her earlier statement.

“I apologize for the commotion I’ve caused.”

Causing commotion was bad, apparently.

But given how packed the venue was with gossip columnists and photographers, everyone was delighted by this “commotion.” The reporters should be grateful for the public lynching she’d staged for their benefit.

But it was her husband who deserved an apology. And the staff and sponsors of the show she’d been forced to drop out of...and maybe her most devoted fans. That seemed like enough. Bowing her head to the world—whoever that label referred to—wasn’t an apology that reached where it mattered most.

Sakuta certainly didn’t give a damn. It was none of his business who some celebrity he’d never even met dated or who they had an affair with.

Why should he care if some pushing-thirty ex-idol’s career went down in flames?

He had far more pressing concerns.

Sakuta was sitting in his girlfriend's living room. On the ninth floor of a ten-story building. Mai Sakurajima's apartment.

From his seat on the couch, he'd been watching a robot vacuum industriously cleaning the floor around him.

Mai was on the other couch, across from him. Their eyes briefly met, but he said nothing, turning away. Not to hide his embarrassment, but because he had a question for the third person present.

Sitting next to Sakuta was a girl his age, sporting bright blond hair.

"So, Mai...what's going on here?" he asked. Speaking to his neighbor.

Even though Mai was clearly sitting across from him.

Neither Mai nor the blond seemed confused by Sakuta's actions. Far from it. The girl beside him answered readily.

"Like I said, we've swapped bodies," she said, speaking exactly like Mai always did.

How did Sakuta find himself in this predicament? We'll have to turn back the clock a bit.

The day was September 1, a Monday. The forty days of summer vacation were over, and school had held the opening ceremony for the second term. Sakuta had been expecting to see Mai there.

Now that she was working again, Mai had spent virtually the whole vacation on the job, and he hadn't seen much of her.

And to make matters worse, her agency had made going on dates forbidden. Even when she did have free time, they weren't allowed to do any summer things that were normally staples for couples.

Second term had arrived without him seeing Mai in a swimsuit even once!

The vacation he'd been looking forward to had been *ruined*, but...

Mai had said, "At least we can see each other at school."

Consequently, for the first time in his life, Sakuta had been looking forward to September 1. Last night she'd even called him to say, "See you at school tomorrow."

But once he actually showed up, she was not in her chair during the ceremony. After homeroom, he'd swung by Class 3-1's room, but there was no sign of Mai.

No bag at her desk, no indication she'd come to school at all—he was forced to give up and go home.

As he forlornly dragged his feet back to his apartment, someone came out of the building across the street. It was Mai.

He happily called out to her, but her response had been alarming.

“Who are you?” she asked, regarding him with a look of deep suspicion and slapping his hand off her shoulder.

Mai was a year old than him, and proud of it—no matter how stressed she was, she never let herself lash out at him.

“Sakuta Azusagawa,” he said. “You may have heard of me. I happen to be dating you, Mai. We have a perfectly sweet and innocent relationship together.”

“Pfft. My sister would never date someone with eyes as lifeless as yours.”

The scorn in her voice was a dead giveaway.

Her appearance was indiscernible from Mai, but the way she spoke and her general demeanor made it obvious this was someone else.

“Huh?” he said. “Who are you?”

But the answer to his question came from someone behind him.

“*That* is Nodoka Toyohama.”

He turned around and saw another girl emerging from the glass doors to Mai’s apartment building.

She walked right up to him.

The first thing he noticed was the bright hair. A magnificent blond. All gathered on the left side of her head, like some sort of hostess. An attention-grabbing hairstyle with major volume. Striking makeup around the eyes, too—definitely the kind of look that suggested she loved to party.

She was maybe five foot two. Average height for a girl, but Mai was on the tall side, so she looked small by comparison.

Her build was quite slim, one other girls her age no doubt envied. Some men might be inclined to call her a little *too* thin, but she was clearly athletic, so nothing about her seemed delicate. She was wearing shorts, and he could tell those legs were more toned than slender.

“Nodoka Toyohama?” he said. The name sounded familiar. He thought he recognized this blond girl from somewhere, too.

But where?

He gave her a long look. Then the answer came floating into his mind.

“Oh, right.”

The manga magazine cover. He’d forgotten to throw it out, and it had been sitting in his room for months.

The cover had featured a hot new idol group. Sweet Bullet, as he recalled. And this unfamiliar girl was part of that group—Nodoka Toyohama.

The only reason he remembered that name at all was because her profile had, curiously, listed her favorite thing as “Mai Sakurajima.”

Sakuta had agreed wholeheartedly.

“No, that would be *you*,” he said, pointing at the blond.

“Don’t point.”

She grabbed his finger and pulled it down.

“.....”

That was rather strange. The way she spoke and acted with him... it wasn’t how people normally interacted with a stranger. It was like she knew him. Like...Mai...

“I’m currently Mai Sakurajima,” the blond said. “And that’s Nodoka.”

She pointed at “Mai.” So the blond was Mai, and “Mai” was Nodoka Toyohama.

He understood what she was saying, but accepting it was a different matter.

The blond stretched herself up and whispered in his ear.

“I suspect Adolescence Syndrome,” she said.

Her voice and face were totally wrong, but...that was definitely something Mai would know.

Most people didn’t believe in the mysterious phenomena that term described. They laughed the stories off as mere urban legends. The only people who took it seriously were those with personal experience.

“But this is pretty different from the time I almost disappeared,” she said, driving the point home.

That clinched it. Last spring, Mai had vanished from people’s memories and almost ceased to exist entirely. And the only people who knew this were Sakuta and Mai...and Rio Futaba, a friend he’d asked for advice.

“So you really are Mai?”

“Like I said.”

The blond smiled at him. A bit derisive but nonetheless gentle—a look he’d seen on Mai’s face any number of times. A smile he’d know anywhere.

“Nodoka, you’d better come back in. This isn’t a dream.”

“Huh? Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Accept reality.”

“Accept that I’ve somehow turned into my own sister?”

Nodoka pointed at her reflection in the doors. “Mai” pointed back at her from the glass. Then she began poking her face and patting herself all over.

“No way,” she said. “This *has* to be a dream.”

“Yet everything you touch feels so real.”

“.....”

“I swear it’s not a dream. Just...like something from one.”

“No way... I mean, if this *isn't* a dream...”

Nodoka's lips started quivering. Like she was trying to speak but couldn't find the words. No sound emerged. She'd been struck speechless. She shook her head several times, as if trying to deny the facts.

Finally, she croaked, “That would be...bad...”

A simple, unvarnished fact, provoked by a truth that seemed impossible to believe. When people are really in trouble, it's hard to be eloquent.

After that, Sakuta was invited up to Mai's place so they could discuss the matter in more depth.

They took the elevator to the ninth floor. Mai had a corner apartment.

South facing, lots of sunlight. She lived alone, but it was a three-bedroom. Sakuta was promptly led into the living room.

A big, open layout, with a fancy counter kitchen at one end. Two couches, a coffee table, and a TV stand—minimal furniture, all in the same dignified wood varnish. And the UFO-shaped robot cleaning the floor.

“Mai, how much is your rent?”

“Nothing.”

“Huh?”

“I own it.”

“Ohhh...”

That made sense.

Mai was super-famous and had been acting since she was a kid. Everyone in the country knew her. She'd been in movies, TV series, and commercials. It stood to reason she could afford a condo.

“That's it?” she asked, looking surprised. “I thought you'd be way more worked up if I let you in here.”

“If it was just the two of us, I'd be in your bedroom already.”

“Don't say that with a straight face!”

“I meant every word.”

“Just...sit down. I'll get you something to drink.”

Refusing to engage with him further, Mai opened her fridge.

Sakuta settled down obediently on the couch. A second or two later, Mai...no, she only looked like Mai. *Nodoka* sat down on the couch across from him.

“.....”

Nodoka was clearly still struggling to accept what was happening to her. She was staring at her reflection in the glass tabletop, her expression radiating disbelief.

“.....”

Sakuta decided to leave her to it.

To fill the silence, he reached for the TV remote. The screen was soon showing a news program. A former idol caught cheating, getting hammered with questions after a formal apology.

After a minute of this, Mai came back carrying a tray with three glasses on it. Or at least, this new extroverted blond version of Mai.

“So, Mai...what’s going on here?”

“Like I said, we’ve swapped bodies.”

Once again, he looked from Mai to Nodoka. More accurately, from Mai’s body to Nodoka’s.

“Well, let’s assume that as a given for now...”

The conversation could hardly progress if he got hung up on *that*.

“What is your connection to Nodoka Toyohama, Mai?”

Mai was calling her by her first name, and Nodoka had used the word *sister* earlier. So he had a hunch, one he was fairly certain of. But given the circumstances, he thought it best to get this spelled out.

“I mentioned it once before, right? That I had a sister from a different mother.”

“Yeah, you did.”

After the divorce, Mai’s father had married again and had a daughter with his new wife. Mai and that kid had the same father but different mothers.

But when she’d told him this, he hadn’t imagined the sister was anywhere near Nodoka’s age. If the profile he’d read was accurate, Nodoka Toyohama was in her second year of high school, the same age as Sakuta. Only one year younger than Mai.



“He started fighting with my mother while she was still pregnant,” Mai said, seeing the question forming on his face.

“So why is Nodoka Toyohama here?”

“She showed up suddenly late last night.”

“Late?”

“After midnight.”

“Good lord. Why?”

“She didn’t want to go home.”

“Huh.”

He glanced at Nodoka. She was still staring at her face in the glass tabletop, clutching her head and muttering, “This is crazy...”

He would’ve liked to hear the facts from her directly, but that would clearly have to wait.

“What’s the plan, then?” he asked, turning back to Mai.

“We’ll have to come up with a way to swap back, but we’ll also have to assume that won’t happen any time soon.”

This was Mai’s second go-round with Adolescence Syndrome, so she was much more levelheaded about it.

“Mm, that’s what I thought.”

They had no idea how to accomplish this, much less when it would happen. Even the glimmer of a solution still lay in the future.

A few days spent cutting class wouldn’t hurt, but that wasn’t a long-term solution. The schools would check up on them eventually.

Mai was suggesting they’d have to find a way to live in their new bodies for the foreseeable future—with Mai playing the part of Nodoka, and Nodoka filling in for Mai.

And hopefully they’d figure out a way to switch back in due time.

“Um,” Sakuta said. Nodoka looked up—but only her eyes moved. This was something Mai never did. No matter how much she *seemed* like Mai Sakurajima on the outside, Sakuta’s eyes could instantly tell something was off.

“What?”

The voice was Mai’s. But not the tone. This girl had a guarded snark—the real Mai always sounded far more self-assured.

“Any ideas?” he asked, figuring he might as well go for the heart of the matter.

“Ideas?”

“Like why you might have swapped places with my Mai.”

“I’m not yours.” A hand reached out and pinched his cheek. She might look like a strange blond girl, but the sensation was all Mai. This was a relief.

“I don’t have a clue.”

“Okay.”

He hadn't really had much hope, so he wasn't very disappointed, either.

"But wait..."

"Mm?"

Mai and Sakuta both looked at Nodoka, puzzled.

"How are you two not totally freaking out right now?"

Her gaze shifted from Sakuta to Mai, searching for answers. Mai's and Nodoka's eyes met.

"Ah!" Nodoka said, and immediately rephrased her question as "Why are you two so calm?" in a much more respectful tone. Her whole posture changed, like she was in a job interview, making the nervous energy in the entire interaction painfully obvious.

"I'm not sure what you mean, Nodoka," Mai said, not changing her attitude one iota.

"I—I mean...we've swapped bodies! That! Is! Bonkers! Isn't it?"

"True enough."

Mai nodded, acknowledging the point but...ultimately remained calm. She took a sip of green tea like she didn't have a care in the world.

Nodoka blinked at her. "Is that it?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Mm-hmm? Are you just, like, fine with this?!"

"No, but it's the hand we've been dealt. We don't know how to swap back, so what else can we do? We have to figure out how to manage the situation in the meantime."

"That's...true, but..."

"And given how 'bonkers' it sounds, we can't exactly ask for help. No one would believe us. Even if they did, there'd just be a media frenzy, and they'd cast us aside the moment our audiences get bored. You don't want that, either, right?"

"...No."

"So until we can fix this, I'll have to be you, and you'll have to be me. It's the only way."

"....."

"Am I not making sense?"

"...No, you are."

Nodoka hung her head, seemingly unable to look her sister in the eye. That might not actually be Mai, but Sakuta had never seen "Mai" look this dejected and would have loved to capture the moment forever. Unfortunately, since he didn't own a phone, he didn't have ready access to the necessary camera.

"In that case, let's go over our schedules. I'll get a notebook."

Mai stood up.

"Er, wait, Sis—M-Mai."

“...What is it?”

Mai definitely had an opinion on the way Nodoka had corrected herself, but she was deliberately not addressing the issue. Just like she'd ignored the sudden shift to a more respectful tone earlier. She was clearly choosing to let her sister work things out for herself. Sakuta wondered why but decided to follow her lead for now.

“Before we go over the schedules, can I ask one thing?”

Nodoka's eyes darted from Sakuta to Mai and back again. Before she said a word, it was obvious what the question would be.

“Are you two *really* going out?”

He'd expected this, but the glare in her eyes was far more disgruntled than he'd been prepared for. She seemed ready to cut his head off.

“Yes, we are,” Mai said, smoothly making it official.

Nodoka's frown deepened.

“That doesn't make any sense!” she said. “I'll grant you this Adolescence Syndrome thing, since it's not like I have a choice, but no way is this your boyfriend!”

“Am I that hard to believe?”

“You look ready to sleep with the fishes! Men like you only date the Mai Sakurajimas of the world in their dreams!”

She was so worked up, all traces of her polite tone had fallen away. This was clearly her default attitude.

“I'm glad to be a symbol of hope to drab men everywhere.”

Meanwhile, Mai seemed genuinely surprised by this vehemence.

“Nodoka,” she said, sounding slightly cross.

“.....Yes?”

Nodoka backed down immediately, snapping back to her earlier well-mannered attitude.

“Don't make fun of my boyfriend,” Mai said, pursing her lips.

Sakuta had not expected her to come to his defense, and he was unable to stop himself from grinning.

Mai reached out and pinched his thigh in rebuke. It kinda hurt.

“While it's true that Sakuta always has a dopey-looking face, there are some things you just shouldn't point out.”

“Mai, I think you should have left it unsaid yourself.”

His grin had vanished immediately.

Teasing him seemed to please Mai immensely. Building him up only to tear him down. All with Mai's usual majesty.

“On that note, back to the schedules.”

“Right...”

Nodoka reluctantly nodded. She gave Sakuta a glare like he'd murdered her parents, but since she looked like Mai, this was a real problem for him...because it was kind of a turn-on.

“Wipe that smirk off your face, Sakuta,” Mai said, lightly slapping his cheek. Then she went into the next room.

Sakuta made to follow her, but she snapped, “You stay put,” and he was forced to sit back down.

“I was just gonna open *one* closet, that’s all.” he said.

“Like I’d let you.”

“Aww.”

“Maybe when we’re alone together,” Mai sighed dramatically. Like she had no idea what she should do with him.

She wasn’t planning on letting him get away with anything. Such a shame. Even though she’d finally let him into her home...

But heedless of his crestfallen look, Mai briskly headed to her bedroom. She came back with a notebook that had a bunny character on the front.

“Um,” Nodoka said.

“Mm?”

“About all this—there’s no way I can pretend to be you, Mai.”

“Why not?”

“I’m sure your friends will notice something’s wrong immediately.”

A fair point. But not a concern in Mai’s case.

“That...won’t be an issue at school,” Mai said awkwardly.

“Huh?”

“.....”

“Mai doesn’t *have* any friends,” Sakuta explained.

“Wha—?!”

“Like you have so many yourself,” Mai snapped at him. Maybe she’d wanted to keep that a secret.

“I have some! Three.”

“Isn’t that one more than last time?”

“There’s Kunimi and Futaba, but lately I’ve added Koga.”

“Huh,” Mai said, as if she didn’t care at all.

“Uh...is that it?”

“No man would *ever* dare cheat on me.”

Very confident. Regal as always. Also completely accurate, so he just nodded.

“Back to the point. At the least, pretending to be me at school should be easy. Just show up, sit in my seat, take my classes in silence, and come back here afterward. No need to speak to anyone.”

“...R-right.”

Nodoka nodded, still coming to grips with the idea. This was clearly not gelling with her concept of who Mai was. Given Mai’s fame, Nodoka must have assumed her sister would be popular in class, too...

“Um...kinda the same deal here,” she admitted.

“Oh?”

“Since my debut last year, I haven’t had time to talk to anyone at school... I just couldn’t keep up with what anyone in my group was talking about. At first, they used to brief me on what I missed, but when that happened again and again, it just got awkward... Then we changed classes at the start of second year, and I dyed my hair over spring break and really stood out, so...you should be fine.”

“You got to Ouyou Academy, right?”

Even Sakuta knew that name. It was a famous girls’ school in Yokohama. A combined junior and senior high. If she’d passed the exam to start at the high school level, she must’ve been pretty smart. But at a strict girls’ school like that, her blond hair would stick out like a sore thumb.

“Man, I dunno...,” Sakuta said, then stopped, unsure what he was trying to say.

“Well, what is it?”

“Both of you have no friends at all? That’s so sad.”

“Just to be clear, I might have none at school, but I have plenty at work,” Mai said. This sounded like an excuse. Nodoka was nodding, though.

“Are you suuure?” Sakuta asked.

“You have some strange ideas about me.”

“Like who? Anyone I know? If it’s some handsome actor, I’m against it.”

“I’m especially close with the gravure idol Yurina Yamae and the model Millia Kamiita.”

Sakuta recognized both those names. Yurina Yamae was on the covers of many a weekly manga magazine, and Millia Kamiita was a biracial model who’d been making a lot of appearances on variety TV shows lately.

“We text each other daily, and we had lunch together last week. They’ve both spent the night here. Relieved it wasn’t a hot actor?”

“Please never ever make friends with men,” he said.

As he spoke, he turned back to Nodoka, feeling her staring at him.

It was more of a glare, really. Like she’d been waiting for her chance to speak.

“I have a *lot* of friends from junior high back home! I still hang out with them! I went to visit just the other day!”

She sounded exactly like her sister.

“And I get on well with the other girls in my group. Got that?”

“Sure, sure. Frankly, having no friends at school works in our favor this time, so let’s call it a good thing.”

As Sakuta brought his line of interrogation to a close, Mai poked

him in the forehead.

“What was that for?”

“You were being a snot, so I’m training you not to be.”

“Then I accept it.”

“You do?” Nodoka gave him a look like she’d just peered into a dumpster.

“Anyway, school isn’t an issue...but work is.”

Mai Sakurajima was an actress. Nodoka Toyohama was an idol. Those schedules were a much more pressing problem.

“This is all I have,” Mai said, putting her notebook down. It was mostly empty. Astonishingly so, given how little free time she’d had in August. “They adjusted the TV show schedule, and we wrapped my part during vacation.”

The remaining work she had lined up involved shoots for fashion magazines and some related interviews. A few commercials, too.

“I kept it light for second term, since a certain someone was feeling neglected.”

“Even if we can see each other, if we’re not allowed to date, there’s no point.”

Sakuta’s protests were ignored.

“You’ve done fashion shoots before, right?” she asked. “Think you can handle them?”

Apparently, Mai wasn’t going to let him flirt right now. He turned his attention back to Nodoka.

“I think so...,” Nodoka said. She didn’t sound that confident.

“For the interviews, they’ll send the questions ahead of time, so we can prep for that.”

“But the commercials...”

“Here’s the script and storyboard.”

Mai put six or seven pages, clipped together, on the table. When Nodoka didn’t reach for the papers, Sakuta flicked through them, curious.

“Oh!” he said, surprised—the filming location was a place he knew well. One of the stations on the Enoden line, which he and Mai both took to school. Minegahara High was at Shichirigahama Station, and this was set at the stop before it, Kamakura High School Station.

“This director sticks to the script, so it shouldn’t be that hard. You did theater before you joined the idol agency, right?”

“.....”

Staring fixedly at her hands, Nodoka managed to nod. She really looked despondent. Downright grim. She probably had some acting talent, but it was clear she was afraid she could never replace Mai Sakurajima.

If Sakuta had picked up on this, then Mai must’ve been fully

aware of it, but she gave no indication of that. She simply moved on to the next topic.

"I'm going to have a tough time learning your songs and choreography."

Nodoka Toyohama's schedule was jam-packed. The Sweet Bullet members had singing and dancing lessons every day. Plus mini concerts on weekends at malls or event halls. They only ran through two or three songs at these performances, but that meant Mai would have to master at least three numbers a week.

And on the last Sunday in September, they had a solo concert at a venue in Shibuya.

"Have you actually done any dancing, Mai?" Nodoka asked.

"Do you have videos of your practice sessions?"

"I do."

Nodoka reached for her bag—a duffel bag, big enough for a spare set of clothes. She pulled out three discs in clear plastic cases—probably DVDs.

"Here," she said, offering them up with both hands.

"Thanks."

Mai got to her feet and put one of the discs in her player. Sakuta was still holding the remote, so he turned the TV back on. Mai shot him an appreciative glance. He switched it over to the HDMI input. Voices came over the speakers. "Is this on?" "Okay, give it a shot."

A moment later, the screen lit up. Showing a dance studio somewhere. Wooden floors, like a gym. Mirrors on the walls.

Nodoka and the rest of her group were all lined up.

As one, they took a deep breath.

Up-tempo music started blaring, and all seven members began dancing, perfectly in synch and on beat.

Watching it, Mai deftly weaved a few light steps as she swung her hands and moved her body. Since she was following the screen's lead, she was a beat behind, but she ran through the whole number with such ease Sakuta immediately ceased to worry about a thing.

There was a faint sheen of sweat on her brow. Her chest was rising and falling, a little out of breath. But she turned back to Sakuta, looking pleased with herself.

"The real one was snappier," he said.

"I can see how surprised you are."

"You got me there. My mind's blown."

He meant it. Mai was usually all grown-up and collected. Even if she was about to miss a train, she never rushed. He'd never seen her do anything particularly athletic. So he'd never expected her to be able to pull off the fast choreography of an idol routine.

"I had dance training when I was still with my theater group,"

Mai said, looking pleased with his response.

“So not just acting, then?”

“Right. The place I went to did acting, dancing, and singing. They had plenty of musicals, so...”

“Oh, makes sense.”

Mai wiped her sweat with a sleeve, then gulped down the rest of her tea.

“You can leave now, Sakuta,” she said.

“Huh? Why?”

This had come out of nowhere and caught him off guard. He was finally in her home! He wanted to breathe this air as long as possible. Convince her to show him more than just the living room.

“I’m all sweaty, so I’d like to take a bath.”

“I’d love to see you with that post-bath glow.”

“But this is Nodoka’s body, so that’s a no.”

“As long as it’s you inside, I don’t care which body you have.”

“But I do. Go on, get out of here. You’re keeping Kaede waiting, right?”

He glanced at the clock; it was almost noon. Time for lunch. Mai was right; his sister, Kaede, would be getting hungry, impatient for his return.

Giving up on post-bath Mai, Sakuta got to his feet.

“Then we’ll meet you down below at seven fifty tomorrow.”

“I’ll make sure Toyohama gets to school.” He headed for the door.

“See you later,” he said, putting his shoes on.

On his way to the elevator, a voice called his name.

Mai had put sandals on and followed him. The door closed behind her.

“Good-bye kiss?”

“No.”

“Then...”

“Uh, Sakuta...it’s a big if, but...”

Mai’s gaze shifted nervously.

“If you’re stuck like that forever, I’ll just have to put up with it.”

“Put up with a real-life idol singer,” Mai said, laughing. But the anxious look in her eyes was gone. “Just to be clear, you aren’t laying one finger on Nodoka’s body.”

“Aww.”

“Think you can deal with that the rest of our lives?” She shot him an impish grin. The same self-assured smile she always had when she was teasing him.

“Not really what I had in mind.”

“Don’t sweat the details.”

“It’s kind of the point!”

“Look after her tomorrow,” Mai said, suddenly serious again.

There was only one response to a request like that.

“Will there be a reward when you get your body back?”

The elevator arrived, and he stepped on board.

“If I ever do,” Mai said grimly. Driving the point home. Like she was almost certain that wouldn’t be happening any time soon.

But then she flashed him a warm smile, and the elevator doors closed.

“If it’s Mai inside, is dating an idol acceptable?” he muttered aloud as the elevator descended.

He had his answer before it reached ground level. “Absolutely.”

Practically speaking, Mai merely looked like Nodoka now. No point fussing about anything else. Worrying wasn’t going to solve anything.

If he was gonna worry, it should be about something that mattered. Like what exactly he was making for lunch.

The elevator came to a stop, and the bell rang politely.

“Fried rice?” he muttered, remembering the leftover rice sitting in the back of the fridge.

2

The next morning, Sakuta was woken by their pet cat, Nasuno, stepping on his face. Apparently, she was hungry.

Kaede lived to wake Sakuta up, so having Nasuno beat her to the punch was a crippling blow. She started wailing, “I wish I was a cat!”

But when he made scrambled eggs the way Mai taught him, she instantly recovered.

“What a beautiful morning!”

She saw him off as he left a little earlier than usual. He’d promised to meet Mai.

As he left the elevator and stepped out into the street, he was greeted with a yelp, half-surprised, half-tense.

“Good morning,” the yelper said, bowing to him. A delicate-looking girl, only four foot eleven. Wearing a junior high school uniform that still looked brand-new. Her name was Shouko Makinohara.

“Mornin’,” he said.

She smiled happily as she rushed over to him like a puppy.

“Should you be running?” he asked, momentarily worried.

He knew Shouko had a serious heart condition.

“I’ll be fine,” she said, looking proud. “I’ve been in good shape

since I was discharged.”

“Cool.”

“But thank you for worrying.”

“You’re welcome.”

Shouko smiled again. She looked well, like she really was healthy again.

“You get some good news or something?”

“Why do ask?” she asked in reply, surprised.

“You’re all smiles.”

“I—I am?”

Having that pointed out seemed to embarrass her. She put her hands on her cheeks and rubbed them.

“How’s Hayate?”

“Great. He’s been eating a lot.”

Hayate was a white kitten they’d found. Even in his new home, if Shouko was looking after him, he was taken care of. He’d grow up big and strong for sure.

“You always go this way?”

“.....?” Shouko blinked at him, not sure what the question meant.

“On your way to school?”

“Oh, yes. But also no.”

A confirmation and a denial. Confusing.

“Huh? You aren’t going to school?”

She was wearing her uniform, so he’d assumed.

“I *am* going to school, but I don’t always go this way.”

She’d told him where she lived once, and this *was* a bit out of the way if she was headed for the station.

“So why today?”

“I was hoping I’d run into you.”

“Ah.”

“And I did!”

Shouko grinned again.

“.....”

“.....”

Three full seconds of silent smiles. Shouko’s face slowly started turning red. Even her ears and neck.

“Er, um, I’d better go!” she said, suddenly flustered. “I’ll be late otherwise!”

She ran off, fanning her face with her hands.

“Take your time!” he called after her.

She turned back once and waved. He waved back.

Then he watched till she was out of sight.

“Mornin’,” said a familiar voice behind him.

He turned around and found Mai and Nodoka standing there.

“Morning, Mai.”

The blond girl acknowledged his greeting with her eyes. Whatever faint hope he’d had that she’d be back in her own body in the morning was instantly dashed.

“How long were you watching?”

“Since you made Shouko turn red by staring at her.”

There was no hint of emotion in Mai’s voice. Did she not care, or was she secretly mad? It was hard to tell.

Prying further would likely result in him digging his own grave, so he opted to change the subject.

Fortunately, Mai’s appearance gave him plenty to talk about. As Nodoka Toyohama, she was wearing a school uniform—from Nodoka’s school. A simple, clean sailor uniform. The skirt was all the way below the knees—like every strict girls’ school required. But this didn’t work at all with the dazzling blond hair bound to one side, or the striking makeup around the eyes. It all clashed.

“What’s that smirk for?” she asked, narrowing her eyes.

“I dig the outsider vibe.”

“.....”

That was a compliment, but she stomped on his foot anyway.

“Also, you had the uniform handy?”

Nodoka had been one well-prepared runaway. Maybe this wasn’t her first time. Curious, he glanced her way.

In Mai’s body, Nodoka was wearing the Minegahara summer uniform he was used to. Despite the lingering heat, she had on black tights, albeit thin ones. Mai had explained that this was to prevent her legs from getting tanned. Celebrities had it rough.

Nodoka didn’t seem used to summertime tights and was fiddling with them under her skirt. Kinda sexy. His eyes were instantly glued to it.

“Sakuta,” Mai hissed, twisting his cheek.

“Yes, Mai?”

“You were imagining something perverted, right?”

“It’s your body, so it’s allowed!”

“Not while Nodoka’s in it.”

“Then am I allowed to think perverted things about you while you’re in her body?” he asked, glancing over the blond girl’s uniform.

“Absolutely not.”

“What options do I have left?!”

“Don’t look so desperate. You can go without.”

“Aww.”

“If you don’t like it, figure out a way to switch us back.”

“As long as it’s you inside, it doesn’t matter what you look like.”

“It matters to us!”

They kept talking on the way to Fujisawa Station.

The station lay at the heart of a city of 420,000 people, and they were in the midst of the morning rush.

Mai split off here, heading to school in Yokohama. She would have to take the Tokaido Line, while Sakuta and Nodoka would board the Enoden for Shichirigahama Station.

"Oh, Sakuta!" Mai called, just before she stepped through the JR gates.

"What?"

They'd almost reached the connecting passage to the Enoden Fujisawa Station, but he left Nodoka there and ran back to Mai.

"I have a favor to ask," she said, glancing up at him. Nodoka was shorter than Mai, so even familiar body language looked rather different. Mai was five foot five, so when she looked at him, only her eyes moved—but Nodoka was five foot two, so she had to tilt her whole head.

"I'd love to hear that line when you have your own face."

"Don't be dumb."

"Your attractiveness makes me dumb."

"About Nodoka," she said, her serious expression quickly ending the jokey vibe. "I think I can guess, but...if you can, ask her what happened."

"If she ran away from home, probably something with her parents."

"I imagine so. Still..."

Mai paused for a moment. Her eyes drifting sideways.

"This might also be about me," she said softly.

"It's hard having a sister as famous as you?"

And not just any sister, but one from a different mother.

"Am I overthinking it?" she asked.

"I think being your sister could be pretty rough. You're like the worst person to get compared with."

And in Nodoka's case, she was also playing the celebrity game, which really twisted the knife.

"Rude," Mai said, sulking.

Sakuta pretended not to notice. It would have been easy to take it back, but she knew it was true, so there was no point in paying lip service to the idea. It was better to be on the same page here.

"My mother's pride as a parent and a woman is...affecting Nodoka, too."

"Pride?"

"Didn't I mention? My mother only put me in the business to pay my father back for leaving her for another woman."

Mai Sakurajima had made a spectacular television debut and remained firmly on the front lines of celebrity ever since. She'd built her fame until she was a household name. And rubbing that fame in her father's face was how Mai's mother kept her pride intact.

Showing off how well you were doing after going separate ways did often dull the pain. He could understand that sentiment. It was a form of revenge. And it could be very motivating.

But it sucked to be the children caught up in their parents' wake. Especially when they were too young to really understand how their parents felt.

Sakuta glanced back at Nodoka.

"Remember how she said yesterday she'd been in a theater troupe, too?" Mai asked.

"I do."

"It wasn't the one I was in, but...when we were little, we ran into each other at auditions sometimes."

"Ohhh..."

That would definitely make things worse. Both their mothers must have been agitated. Sparks flying under the surface at the audition venue.

Mai and Nodoka were pawns in a proxy war.

And the results of that war were brutally clear. Mai became nationally famous, and Nodoka had left the theater troupe and was now a newly minted idol, moving from one small venue to another, trying to build a following.

The humiliation of this could certainly warp the relationship between many a mother and her child. Maybe that was why Nodoka had run away.

"Well, as a favor to you, I'll see what I can get out of her."

"Thanks. I'd better go."

She gave him a little wave and disappeared through the gates.

Sakuta headed back to Nodoka.

"Sorry," he said.

He led her down the passage from the JR station. Before them lay a big department store, with the Enoden Fujisawa ticket gates to one side.

"What'd she want?" Nodoka asked as they stepped through.

"Mm?" he said, leading her down the platform.

"My sister."

"You curious?"

He wasn't sure if he should tell her but figured this wasn't the time.

"Ugh," Nodoka said and turned her back on him.

"....."

She didn't say anything else. They simply stood together at the far end of the platform.

"You sure it's not a problem to let Mai just head into school?"

"Hmm?"

"Wondering if the idol Nodoka Toyohama would cause a riot if she showed up on a train like everyone else."

"Are you making fun of me?"

"I'm genuinely concerned."

"....."

Nodoka gave him a long look, as if trying to get a read on the question. Mai would never be this transparently suspicious. Having a different person inside really made her body seem totally alien.

"She'll be fine," Nodoka muttered. "Nobody knows who I am."

She turned her eyes away. Clearly comparing her own fame with Mai's.

As if trying to hide that, she added, "I feel like I'm the one who should be worried. Does she just ride this train all the time?"

"She's a bit *too* famous, so nobody dares come up to her."

But she definitely got a lot of attention. Especially since she'd started working again. Lots of "Ah! Look!" or "Wow, is that really her?!" or people arguing "Go talk to her," "You go talk to her!"

Those reactions were totally fine, and Mai never seemed bothered by *them*. On the other hand, it definitely bugged her that people took photos—not that she'd ever admit it. Mai would happily oblige if someone *asked* to take a photo with her, but most people just stole shots behind her back without permission, and that really got on her nerves.

Even now, a dude in a suit had a phone in his hand and was glancing her way. As a train pulled in, he pointed the lens in her direction.

"This way, Mai."

"Huh? What?"

Her put a hand on her shoulder and switched places with her. With him in the way, the dude couldn't get a shot.

He heard the shutter a moment later. So did Nodoka. She peered around Sakuta and spotted the camera. The man pretended he was merely taking a photo of the retro-looking train car.

"....."

Nodoka gave Sakuta a look.

When he pretended not to notice, she said, "That won't be enough to get me on your side."

"I don't need you to be."

Sakuta stepped onto the train at the very front.

He led Nodoka over to the doors on the other side. The train

wasn't *packed*, but in the middle of the morning, there definitely weren't any seats.

He stood in front of her and grabbed an overhead strap.

After a bit, the warning bell sounded, and the doors closed. As the train rolled forward, the view outside the window changed. The big station building was soon out of sight, and they were rattling through a quiet residential neighborhood.

Nodoka was standing bolt upright, watching the view passing by. A gloomy expression on her face. She didn't seem to be paying any attention to the other passengers. Diligently pretending not to notice the looks she was getting.

In that alone, she was exactly like the real Mai Sakurajima. You would never guess there was someone else in there.

Nodoka knew how to act the part.

The train stopped and started, advancing one station at a time toward their destination.

"Next stop: Enoshima. Enoshima next."

The same voice that always played. A calm female voice, with a comforting warmth to it.

"Like a bus."

"Mm?"

"This part."

She had a point.

After Enoshima Station, the space around the tracks grew very tight. It threaded its way between houses all the way to the next stop, Koshigoe Station.

"Should there even be a train here?"

There was someone's front door right outside the window. Did the people who lived there have to check for trains every time they left the house? This was Sakuta's second year riding this line, but that mystery had remained unsolved.

Every now and then something caught Nodoka's interest, but each time, she stifled that emotion, composing Mai's face once more.

"You're definitely getting there," Sakuta said, impressed by her performance. Even the way she brushed her hair back was Mai-like.

"As a kid, I used to copy her roles," Nodoka said. She was even talking like Mai now. "I was proud of her...and looked up to her."

Was the use of past tense significant? Why did she sound so bored? Sakuta considered asking, but before he could, Nodoka let out a little gasp.

The train had left the houses behind and was running along the coast, with an unobstructed view of the water. The windows showed nothing but sky and sea. The sky gradually shifting from white to blue. The deeper blue of the ocean dazzling in the morning sunlight.

The horizon spreading in the distance, as far as the eye could see.

In that one moment, there was no trace of Mai. The smile that broke out on her face looked far younger than any he'd ever seen Mai make.

She was still staring at the sea when the train rolled into Shichirigahama Station, where Sakuta and Mai went to school.

It was a tiny station, without any real ticket gate. An odd little place—it was like you were just walking down an ordinary street and suddenly found yourself at a station. From the platform, it was only a couple of stairs, and you were already outside.

It was her first time here, but Nodoka kept her cool as she walked next to Sakuta. There was a slight crease on her brow, probably a reaction to the smell of salt on the breeze.

The walk from the station to Minegahara High was less than five minutes. They just had to cross the tracks, and then the school gate was right ahead.

Inside there, Nodoka whispered, "Lots of people staring."

"Well, you're really famous, Mai."

"That can't be all. Am I doing anything weird?"

She glanced down at herself nervously.

"Don't worry. At a glance, you look just like Mai."

"Then what?"

"Well, that's the thing."

Sakuta had a hunch. He'd been getting similar looks during the opening ceremony yesterday.

"What thing?" Nodoka asked, baffled. Her first contact with this school's atmosphere, so the answer wasn't obvious.

"Everyone here knows I'm dating Mai."

"So?"

"And we just got off summer vacation."

"Again, so?"

"They're all wondering how far we got."

"....."

She didn't react at first. She let the thought sink in. Finally, realization dawned.

"Th-then...b-by *how far* you mean...you know?"

There was a squeak in her voice.

"What do I know?" he asked, enjoying her reaction way too much.

"You know! If you had..."

She couldn't bring herself to say it out loud. Her voice got quieter until it actually disappeared. He couldn't make out the last word at all. Even her ears were red.

"Had?"

“Obviously...s...”

Nodoka almost said it, then turned even redder.

“S—what?”

“S...s.....s..... I can’t say it!”

Looking furious, she punched him in the shoulder. It hurt a lot. Her usual look definitely gave the impression that she fooled around, but the real Nodoka couldn’t even say the word *sex*.

“Careful, the act’s starting to slip,” he said softly.

She’d gotten a bit too loud, and people were staring.

“.....”

At the reminder, she quietly lowered her fist. But she was definitely glaring daggers. Still pretty embarrassed. Was she wondering if Sakuta had done anything like that with Mai? Almost certainly.

“You heard yesterday that we have a sweet and innocent relationship, right?”

“Th-then how far *have* you gone?” she demanded, apparently really wanting to make this point clear.

“You don’t know?”

He meant “Mai didn’t tell you?” but he didn’t want anyone within earshot wondering why he’d say that.

“She said to ask you.”

“Hmm.”

“Don’t play dumb! I dunno how close we’re supposed to be!”

“Well, just play like we’ve been dating two months.”

“Two months...two months...so...you’ve held hands?”

“We’re not *children*.”

“Oh, shut up!”

“Argh, you fool...”

She’d yelled again, and now everyone was giving them dubious looks.

“Ahhhhh, sorry!” he said, putting on a show. “Please don’t get mad at me, Mai.”

“J-just don’t do it again,” Nodoka said, recovering.

They walked in silence until the crowd lost interest.

“S-so you’ve ki-ki-ki—”

“Are you imitating a chimp? You’re good!”

“Ki-kissed, you ass.”

“.....”

“Y-you have?”

“No, no,” Sakuta lied, on the assumption that admitting the truth would lead to another commotion. Regardless of what she normally looked like, the girl inside Mai was clearly sheltered.

“Then how far?”

“We’ve held hands.”

“N-now who’s a child?!”

While they hashed out the details of their relationship, they reached the school entrance. Pretending to be inseparable, he guided Nodoka to Mai’s shoe locker.

Once they’d both changed into slippers, they went up the stairs toward the classrooms.

Sakuta’s room was on the second floor, but the third-year classes were a floor above that. They split up on the second-floor landing.

“Remember, it’s 3-1.”

“Yeah. And my seat’s the second from the back on the window row.”

Mai had made sure she knew that much the day before.

“Then I just have to sit there quietly until classes are done.”

“I’d say you should definitely go to the bathroom if you need to.”

“Do you think I’m a total idiot?”

“I think you can’t tell when people are joking.”

“.....”

Nodoka glared at him. Looked like she knew he was right. Someone must have told her that before.

“If you need something, I’m in 2-1.”

“Got it. See you.”

Conscious of the students around them, Nodoka quickly put her Mai face on. She smiled faintly and gave him a little wave. This looked a lot like the real Mai.

He watched until she rounded the corner of the stairs, then someone grumbled, “You’re blocking the path, Azusagawa.”

He looked behind him and saw a girl in a white lab coat. One of Sakuta’s few friends—Rio Futaba.

She had her long hair bound at the back and was glaring with heavy-lidded eyes through her glasses.

“Nice timing, Futaba. I need some help.”

Rio’s scowl deepened. She clearly knew what *that* meant.

“Have you considered a purification ritual?”

“What for?”

“With all the trouble that comes knocking at your doorstep, you are *clearly* cursed.”

“Anyone who assumes they’re cursed is full of themselves. Everyone’s got it equally hard.”

“Well, if you say so...”

She trailed off, her expression clearly wishing he’d leave her out of it.

“Putting speculation about what’s happening aside, this time around, for once, the path to a solution is pretty obvious.”

This was Rio’s opening statement when Sakuta stepped into the science lab at lunch. He’d given her the bullet points before morning homeroom.

He sat across the lab table from her, munching on a *yakisoba* roll he’d bought from the lunch break bakery truck. Between them was a beaker on a gas burner, the water in it simmering away.

When it reached the boiling point, Rio poured it into a cup of instant *harusame*.

“You on a diet?” he asked.

For some reason, she glared at him.

“The living embodiment of tactlessness told me I was heavy.”

“Who might that be?”

“Obviously the Sakuta who gave me a ride on the back of his bike.”

“...This explains a lot.”

Sakuta frowned, then remembered. Over summer vacation, they’d summoned Yuuma in the middle of the night and then headed for the beach to light some fireworks. Sakuta had put Rio on the back of a bicycle to get her there.

“A life where you think I’m fat is a life too humiliating to be worth living.”

It seemed like he’d hit a nerve, so he thought it’d be better to get the conversation back on track.

“So what’s this about a path to a solution?”

“You really are the worst, Azusagawa.”

“Thank you.”

“This involves a hypothetical definition of Adolescence Syndrome triggers based on previous examples.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“My impression is that unstable psychological conditions are the direct cause of these inexplicable phenomena.”

“I agree.”

The previous cases—particularly Rio’s and Tomoe’s—were consistent with that theory.

“So you just need to resolve the situation causing the instability at the source.”

“Makes sense.”

“And if I have a pretty good idea what the source of this is just by hearing a quick rundown, I imagine you’ve already worked it out

yourself.”

Rio held up her cell phone, showing Sakuta the screen.

It was a fansite dedicated to the activities of the idol group Sweet Bullet.

They'd been around for a year now. After auditions had been held to discover new talent, the current seven members were picked.

Since then, the group had released five singles, none of which had sold particularly well. Only one of them had even hit the top twenty the week it went on sale.

The concerts they'd put on generally saw them paired up with other idols from the same agency. Mostly pretty small venues. Nothing larger than three hundred people.

They'd only made a handful of TV appearances, and even then, most of them were on local television.

Nodoka herself seemed to rank third or fourth within the group, popularity wise. Since there were only seven of them, that was right in the middle. Her nickname was apparently Doka.

You could glean that much info in no time at all from a single phone. The power of the modern day.

“Meanwhile, Sakurajima...”

Rio took the phone back and poked at it a little more.

Then she showed him a rundown of everything Mai had done, from her spectacular morning soap debut to the present day. Row after row of hit movies and TV shows and countless awards, all thoroughly documented.

Even skimming the whole list took a while.

Like Rio said, the cause was plain to see.

Having a sister that accomplished would give anyone a complex. Mai was just *too* accomplished.

“But how do you fix *this*?”

“By becoming a nationally famous idol?”

Rio didn't sound like she was joking.

“It was a serious question,” Sakuta said.

“I gave a serious answer,” Rio said.

She took the lid off her *harusame* and stuck a fork in them. He waited for her to say something else, but she didn't so much as flash a smile until her noodles were gone. Apparently, this was how girls paid you back for calling them heavy. He would have to avoid that in the future.

During his afternoon classes, Sakuta took Rio's thoughtful advice to heart and considered ways to turn Nodoka into a top idol.

But he wasn't exactly a Midas-touch producer, so he came up with exactly nothing. He knew it was doomed from an early stage, and he

was forced to start actually paying attention to his classes. Thus, the afternoon went by.

He could think about this more once he actually talked to her about the problem. Nodoka had yet to tell Mai or Sakuta anything about why she'd run away from home.

After school, Sakuta headed for the third-year classes to collect Nodoka but ran into her on the landing.

"Oh, destiny!"

"In what way?" she scoffed.

After spending a whole day as Mai, she'd become much more Mai-like.

At this level, given that nobody at school was all that close to her, she could easily be Mai without any students noticing anything wrong.

"We're headed home, right?" he asked.

They took the stairs together. From the landing halfway up to the second floor, then down the stairs toward the first.

Partway down those stairs, Nodoka said, "I still can't believe it."

"Mm?"

"She really doesn't have any friends at school."

"I wasn't there to see it myself, but Mai was so busy working during her first term here that she didn't come to school at all."

She'd completely missed her chance to fit in with the class, to become part of the student body. Mai had said she'd been so busy acting her whole life that she'd never really fit in at elementary or junior high, either. Making up for the time she'd lost was an art beyond her capabilities. She'd gone her whole life without knowing what having "normal" friends was like.

"Such an ordinary reason..."

"Reasons usually are."

There was a long silence, and then she said, "Yeah, fair enough."

She must have remembered how her own high school friendships had faded. He could hear the weight of that experience in her tone.

Outside the school grounds, the bells were ringing at the railroad crossing ahead.

"Haven't seen one of those in a while," Nodoka said.

"Bragging about being a city kid?"

There were a lot of elevated tracks these days, so many modern lines never actually intersected with streets.

"That ain't worth bragging about."

A train pulled out of Shichirigahama Station and moved through the crossing. It was traveling so slowly they could make out the faces of everyone on board. A number of Minegahara students included.

They must have booked it out of the school after classes ended.

As they watched the train roll away, the warning bells stopped. It was suddenly quiet. The gates slowly lifted.

The crowd of waiting students started moving again. Sakuta and Nodoka crossed with them.

In front of them was a gentle downslope. It ran all the way to Route 134. And beyond that there was nothing but ocean, which glittered in the late afternoon sun.

A gust of wind came up the hill, smelling like the end of summer.

"The ocean..." Nodoka said, stopping where the other students took a right turn toward the station.

Sakuta had taken a step that way himself, but he stopped, looking at the water.

"Why don't we take a detour?" he asked, then started walking in the direction of the beach.

Nodoka followed soon after.

The light at Route 134 took ages to turn green, but once they crossed, Nodoka quickly ran down the stairs to the beach.

"It really is the ocean!"

"Girl, you've got one in Yokohama, too."

"It's better with a beach," Nodoka said. The sand was grabbing her feet, but she seemed to be enjoying the sensation.

It was a weekday, so there weren't many people playing on the beach. A few families with small children, and a few college students whose summer vacations likely extended into September. And the usual crowd of windsurfers out on the water.

It was downright deserted compared with the peak summer crowds.

"Am I allowed in?" Nodoka asked, her eyes locked on some kids in the surf.

"Uh, it's not like there's a license required..."

"Then I'm going for it," she said before he even finished. "This heat is killing me!"

"What about those?" he asked, pointing to her tights.

"Huh? Obviously, I'm gonna take them off."

Nodoka's hands vanished down the sides of her skirt. She rummaged around down there a bit, and the tights wound up around her knees. She peeled the rest off one foot, leaning on the breakwater for support, her upper body turned to reach the foot held up behind her.

Quite a trick. Almost gave him a glimpse inside the skirt, but not quite.

Though that was plenty alluring in its own right.

"I had no idea girls taking tights off was so sexy."

"D-don't watch, dumbass!"

"I *am* your boyfriend. I'm allowed."

"Dating or not, some shit is off-limits!"

She got the other half off the same way. She rolled the tights up, shoved them in her bag, and raced into the surf, leaving Sakuta in her wake.

"Oh, this feels amazing! This is the best beach!" Nodoka yelled, splashing along the whitecaps.

"You're right. This is the best."

He almost never got to see Mai's bare legs. They were mesmerizing. It was probably the first time he'd ever seen them paired with her school uniform.

"Wh-why are you staring at my legs?"

"They're really nice."

"Stop looking at my sister's body like that!"

"I wish it was wrapped around me."

"....."

That last one disturbed her so much she couldn't even manage a response. Clearly, she'd gotten the wrong idea.

"Just so we're clear, I meant my face."

"Why would you think *that* was any better? Drop dead."

"Mai would probably say, 'Having a *younger* boy's face between my legs is no big deal.'"

"...Sis, what do you see in this guy?"

"....."

"What's with the dead look in your eyes? You wanna fight?"

"No, but I do have a question."

"Huh?"

Something he'd been wondering since yesterday.

"Why do you avoid that word when you're talking to Mai?"

She'd even cut herself off, calling Mai by her name instead.

"....."

"You keep changing your tone so you sound more polite, too. Totally different from how you act with me."

"Of course I talk polite! Professionally, she's my 'senpai.'"

That definitely sounded evasive. She refused to look him in the eye, too. Her gaze was locked on the waves at her feet.

"That's all?"

"Yes."

"Then why go to her place when you left home?"

"Huh?"

"Normally, if you're such a mess you've gotta run away from home, you don't go to somebody you can't even admit is your sister."

“.....”

“Personally, I’d pick someone much closer than that.”

Nodoka herself had brought up her friends from junior high. She’d said she was still going to visit.

“I’m not like you.”

“So there’s something you want Mai to know?”

“!”

Her shoulders twitched. She might look like Mai, but her poker face was not nearly as advanced. She was biting all the bait he laid out.

“Is it something like, ‘I super-hate you, Sis!’”

“No!” she yelled over him. “That’s not it...,” she whispered.

But the way she said it, he could only assume he’d been right. Her overly vehement denial had basically confirmed it. If nothing else, Sakuta had no doubt in his mind anymore.

“Do what you want, girl,” he said cheerily. Not having any intention of keeping up with her turbulent emotions.

“.....”

Nodoka stared at him, as if trying to get a read on his intent.

“I figure if you ran away from home, you must have had a fight with your parents.”

“.....”

Silence signaled agreement.

“And if Mai’s the cause of *that*, stands to reason you’d hate her.”

“?!”

Her eyes went wide. He was definitely on the money.

“Wh-what is your deal?!”

“Girls really do blame the other girl when their boyfriend cheats on them.”

He was sure Mai would definitely rake *him* over the coals, though.

“I didn’t even say anything!”

“You don’t need to spell things out. Mai probably knows, too.”

“No way...”

“I’m pretty sure. That’s what we talked about when she stopped me this morning.”

“...It’s none of your business!”

“Then give me her body back.”

“.....”

Nodoka glared directly at him, not averting her eyes. She must’ve really not liked his attitude. But he didn’t like hers either, so they’d just both have to deal.

“You’re the reason?” Nodoka asked after a brief silence.

“For what?”

“That she went back to work.”

There was a grim look in her eyes.

"No," he said, but if Nodoka asked Mai, she'd probably get a yes. Sakuta didn't agree. He thought it had simply been a matter of time. Him putting his oar in had just moved the timetable up a little.

Mai loved her job, so she would've returned to it eventually, even without his help. She couldn't stay away.

Nodoka didn't seem like she believed him. He ignored her glare, picked up a pebble from the beach, and tossed it at the water.

"So Mai going back to work sparked a fight with your mom?"

Mai had only just gotten back in the game and had already been in several shows. One-episode guest appearances or specials, but fairly major parts nonetheless. And she'd played them all like the star she was.

And she'd shot so many commercials it was hard to watch TV for an hour without seeing her face.

"....."

Nodoka hadn't said a word since her last question. Maybe she felt like anything she did say would be digging herself in further.

She put her shoes on and angrily stalked off down the beach. He shrugged and went after her.

"Don't follow me!"

"We've going the same way. Don't make it a fight; it'll be super-awkward."

"You're the one who did *that*!"

"Ack, this is painful."

"....."

Now she really *was* giving him the silent treatment. She seemed genuinely furious.

They didn't talk at all until they were back home. Sakuta tried a few times, but Nodoka didn't say a thing. Or even look at him.

A grueling thirty-minute trip, but Nodoka emerged victorious.

"Go home and have the talk that you clearly need with Mai," he said outside their respective buildings.

"....."

Nodoka didn't respond or even look at him. Nothing he could do.

"Right, then," he said and turned to go.

"Wait," she said. To his surprise.

She was still staring at the ground.

"...I don't wanna go," she said.

"Huh?"

"Can I stay with you instead?"

She finally looked at him.

"You've mostly got it figured out, so...how can I stay at her place

now?"

Certainly, it was awkward finding out that someone knew everything you were trying to keep secret.

"Don't worry about me knowing. I mean, I'm sure Mai does, too."

"That just makes it worse! And I can't go anywhere else in this body..."

This made some sense, but it also didn't.

"What are you gonna tell Mai?"

"Well..."

"No plan at all?"

"...Come up with an excuse for me."

"That would just make Mai mad at me."

"If you don't let me stay, I'm in trouble."

"Nah, sounds like a pain."

"Oh, come on!"

"Hey!" said a voice behind them. "Think of the neighbors. Don't start yelling outside my home."

A blond girl was walking toward them from the station. Mai.

"What?" she asked.

"....."

Nodoka didn't answer. Couldn't answer. She just stared at the ground, remaining silent.

Mai glanced at Sakuta.

Asking the same question with her eyes.

How should he answer?

Honestly, he didn't think it was a problem anyone *else* should be addressing. Even if, somehow, he was forced to be involved, it should still definitely be Nodoka herself doing the talking. The two people concerned had to hash this out between themselves.

"....."

But it was also true that the problem wasn't going to be solved if nobody said anything. Might be some harsh medicine, but Sakuta figured he would have to get the ball rolling. Staring at the ground in silence sure wasn't gonna accomplish that.

And Sakuta was clinging to the hope that Mai would be able to handle all of Nodoka's mess somehow.

"Given everything between the two of you, Toyohama suggested she stay at my place."

"....."

Nodoka glared at him like he'd betrayed her. This was her own fault. Sakuta had never been on anyone's side but Mai's.

"Why?" Mai asked flatly.

"....."

Nodoka didn't answer. She was still staring silently at the ground.

They were getting nowhere fast.

“Uh, so...,” Sakuta began.

“Wait,” Nodoka said. Not sounding sure of herself. “...I should be the one.”

Maybe she figured if Sakuta was going to say it anyway, she should at least say it herself. In which case, there was no reason for him to continue.

There was another pause, and then Nodoka finally spoke up. “I... I’ve been compared with you my whole life.”

Her voice barely above a whisper.

“Ever since I was little...we went to the same auditions, but you were always the one who got the job. And every time, my mom got so mad. ‘Why can’t you do what Mai does?’”

Mai didn’t say anything. But she didn’t look away, either. She was watching Nodoka closely.

“Then you put your career on hold...and I finally managed to get somewhere, joining Sweet Bullet. Mom was finally a little nicer, even praising me sometimes...and then, and then, you came back?! Grabbing juicy parts on all those TV shows! Tons of commercials! I can’t look at the fashion magazine rack without seeing your face on a cover! Why do you have to stand in my way?!”

“.....”

“Here I am, finally able to achieve *something*, and you just vault right past it! Nobody ever pays attention to anyone but you. Even my own mother never thinks about anyone else! Stop ruining everything I’ve worked so hard for!”

No matter how worked up Nodoka got, Mai said nothing. Her expression never changed. This whole situation seemed to be way harder on Nodoka herself.

But it was way too late for her to back down. She kept her eyes on Mai, too.

“I hate you...!” she said, her voice shaking. The heated emotions of a moment ago were gone now. She was calm again. “I hate my own sister.”

The air was so tense it seemed to have stifled all noise around them.

Like all moisture and color had been drained from the world.

In that gray space, the first words came from Mai.

“Well, good,” she said and let out a sigh of relief.

“Huh?” Nodoka gaped at her. She clearly hadn’t expected that reaction. But what Mai said next made her gulp.

“I’ve always hated you, Nodoka.”

Her voice was flat, curt, and horrifyingly cold.

Nodoka froze completely. Mai’s *good* had lowered her guard, and

then she'd hit her with this. The color was draining from her face. She was clearly in shock. She looked genuinely hurt. Sakuta was pretty shocked by this himself.

"You said you hated me first. Why do you look so surprised?"

Mai had a point, but Nodoka obviously hadn't expected the counterattack, and that made the damage all the more severe. She was horribly pale. Her lips were quivering like she was trying to say something, but nothing meaningful came out.

Keeping her eyes on her hapless victim, Mai spoke again.

"My father abandoned me and left home. Why should I give a damn about some kid he had with another woman?"

This was a reasonable position. Normally, the two of them would never have met.

"All of this is his fault. Not just for leaving. He's the one who first put us on a collision course."

"....."

Nodoka was staring at a crack in the asphalt, unable to look Mai in the face. Letting Mai's words cut her to pieces.

"It's not like you've done anything wrong yourself, Nodoka. But I have my share of pent-up emotions about you, too."

How could anyone possibly respond to that? Even if you understood it, you couldn't agree with it, but trying to deny it would only make things worse.

"....."

Nodoka picked the best option—saying nothing and keeping her head down. Life was full of shit that just wasn't fair.

4

Sakuta sat in the bathtub, lost in thought for what seemed like an eternity. Then a bead of sweat rolled down his bangs and landed quietly on the water's surface.

He blinked, emerging from his reverie.

He'd been in the water so long his whole body felt flushed. If he stayed in any longer, he'd definitely pass out.

Putting his thoughts on hold, Sakuta heaved himself out of the tub.

This was a problem he'd never find an answer to, no matter how long he thought about it.

Mai and Nodoka were each carrying a ton of baggage. Sakuta was pretty sure none of those emotions were simple enough to boil down to "hate"—the roots of it ran way deeper than that. This was a family

issue, the kind of problem made even worse by how close they were.

Not something a third party could casually get involved with.

“But if I’m gonna marry Mai someday, Nodoka’ll be family, too,” he muttered as he dried himself off.

He threw some shorts on and left the changing room, bare chested. Heading straight to the living room.

Someone moved as he entered.

A blond girl was sitting in front of the TV. She had the remote in her hand but was just channel surfing. She had the appearance of Nodoka Toyohama, but that was still Mai inside.

After that big fight, there was no way the two of them could be together. Mai had asked Sakuta to let her stay the night.

Kaede had come to the door expecting Sakuta and freaked out. She’d fled all the way back to her room, terrified of this strange blond girl.

“H-have you become a delinquent?!”

“Not at all.”

“Are you a gigolo?!”

“What in the world makes you think that?”

“You’ve brought another new girl!”

“Ah, right.”

Over the last few months, he’d brought over Mai, Shouko, Rio, and now Nodoka. The sheer quantity of girls he’d had over did lend Kaede’s argument some weight.

“B-but don’t worry!” Kaede said emphatically.

“What now?”

“I promise I won’t tell Mai!”

“Mm, thanks, Kaede.”

“You told me once men live for adventure!”

“I don’t think I did...”

But his protests were apparently not convincing enough. Mai reached up from behind and pinched his butt. He let out a weird yelp.

That whole mess must have worn Kaede out. There was no sign of her—she must’ve already gone to bed. Sakuta glanced at the clock; it was already past midnight. Children *should* be asleep.

“You sure took your time. Were you thinking about me?” Mai asked with an impish grin.

“I am *always* thinking about you, Mai.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“It’s true!”

“What were you *really* doing in there?”

“I was pretending to be a submarine.”

She shot him a look of contempt.

“Ho-ho, you know what I’m talking about?” he asked.

“If we don’t get off this topic right now, I’ll be furious.”

Her eyes looked grim, so Sakuta zipped his mouth closed. In lieu of further speech, he got a sports drink from the fridge and took a sip. The same product Mai was in a lot of ads for. Their eyes met, and she nodded approvingly. But her smile soon vanished.

“Those scars aren’t fading,” she said.

There were three claw marks on Sakuta’s chest. Like welts, they were a different color—and had persisted for two years now.

“Wanna touch?”

“Why would I?”

“I just want you to touch me.”

“Don’t be stupid. Put a shirt on.”

She turned her back on him.

“Feel free to stare all you like,” he said.

“It’d be a tragedy if Nodoka ends up unable to forget the image of your naked body.”

“She’s not a kid or anything.”

“She definitely is.”

“And who just had a huge fight with that kid?”

“I didn’t...”

Mai started to argue the point reflexively but quickly thought better of it. She trailed off awkwardly and pretended to be interested in the TV. The screen was showing late-night sports. A digest of the pro baseball leagues—the pennant race was nearly over. Mai was unlikely to be getting much out of this—her mind was clearly on other things.

“Were you about to say you didn’t mean it?”

“Oh, I meant it,” Mai snapped. “Everything I said, I feel. Still do.”

There was no trace of a lie in her voice or expression.

“But that isn’t the whole truth, either.”

“.....”

This time she didn’t answer. Sakuta took that as a sign he was right.

“There’s all kinds of hate,” he said as he pulled a T-shirt on.

He sat down next to Mai, their shoulders almost touching.

“Not too close,” she said, giving him a shove. She scooted away for good measure.

“I can’t even sit next to you?”

“You seem ready to pounce on me.”

“Was it that obvious?”

“If you do that to Nodoka’s body, I’ll make sure you can never pretend to be a submarine again.”

Mai was unyielding on this point. Her attitude remained unchanged. She was not going to let him touch Nodoka’s body...and

despite the big speech about how much she hated her, she was still calling her Nodoka like they were close.

"That would ruin the one source of entertainment baths have to offer."

"Sigh... Why are you so dumb?"

"All men do it!"

"When you're little, maybe...and I said we're not talking about that! Don't force me to entertain such dirty talk with Nodoka's mouth any further!"

"You're the one who brought it up again."

She scowled at him. He didn't think this was about the submarine thing, though.

Mai had hurt Nodoka's feelings in a fight she'd wanted to avoid. And that had hurt her, too. So she wanted something else from Sakuta—she wanted him to be nice to her. Probably.

But Sakuta chose a different tactic.

"I think honesty is the best policy," he said.

Even if it seemed like Mai wanted him to be nice, if he dutifully comforted her, it would only get on her nerves. Sakuta was well aware she was always harsh on herself that way.

"I don't want you to talk sense."

"You're supercute when you sulk like that."

"Does that mean you think Nodoka's cute?"

"Ugh, don't be obnoxious."

He was expecting her to get mad at him.

"....."

She did give him a wordless glare, but the strength of it faded quickly.

"Okay, I admit to that one," she said, grimacing. "Can I borrow your bath?"

She got to her feet. He watched her go. She turned back at the entrance to the changing room.

"If you peek, I'll stab you."

"Don't stab me until you're back in your own body."

If it was going to be the last thing he ever saw, he wanted the moment to be perfect.

"Idiot," Mai said with a laugh.

She closed the door behind her.

After a while, he heard the shower running.

"Hopefully, she'll switch back in the morning," he muttered. Allowing himself a brief moment of hope.



The cold war commences

1

His hopes were dashed immediately the next morning. The situation remained unchanged. Such a shame.

Actually, it felt like the situation was deteriorating. This was upsetting. Each passing day seemed to just make things worse. Mai and Nodoka both seemed to be accepting the fallout from their big fight and living life accordingly.

Before he knew it, ten days had passed.

Since they were in each other's bodies, they were forced to exchange a certain amount of information, but neither said anything beyond what was absolutely necessary, nor did they have any other contact.

Straightforward, professional communication. And they refused to even hold these meetings on their own. They only met at Sakuta's place, and only with him present.

"Anything to report?"

"Not really."

"Anything from you, Mai?"

"Not really."

"You tell a kid they have to keep a diary for homework, and they'll still write more than either of you."

"....."

"....."

Sakuta's attempts to lighten the mood were all met with the whistling wind of silence.

This meant that Mai was still saying at Sakuta's place. And doing so as Nodoka Toyohama.

Since the day they'd said they hated each other, each of them was dragging those emotions around, letting them just lie there.

A wall of ice had appeared between them and it showed no signs of thawing. If anything, it felt like it was getting bigger and thicker by the day. Mai and Nodoka were doing their level best to counter the effects of global warming.

Sakuta didn't think what they'd said had come from a momentary

rush of emotion. Not for Mai and not for Nodoka. That hadn't been impulsive, and it hadn't just slipped out.

They'd both said those things intentionally, fully aware that their words would hurt the other.

Neither one of them was going to readily accept an apology. They'd said those things knowing it could cause a permanent rift.

But even so, Sakuta was beginning to find their attitudes unsettling. Their actions had one thing in common.

Mai changed into the girls' school uniform every morning, and after school, she headed to the studio as part of the regular activities of the Sweet Bullet idol group. When she didn't have lessons, she either worked on the choreography while watching videos of the dance routines or practiced singing alone in a karaoke box.

Nodoka's routine was similar. She went with Sakuta to school and spoke to no one all day long, perfectly imitating Mai. Doing her part to be the famous actress Mai Sakurajima. Rehearsing Mai's faces on the train home. She had to film a sports drink commercial tomorrow.

She was practicing a natural smile.

The scene involved an awkward encounter on a train station platform with a friend after an argument. Unable to keep their anger, they both start laughing. It required a delicate performance.

The expressions Nodoka was rehearsing looked a lot like Mai's. But the fact that they looked "like Mai's" meant there was still a trace of stiffness to them. Something just a bit phony. And that was something he'd never felt from Mai's performances.

"Well?" Nodoka asked seriously, letting the smile fade.

"I think you're better off asking Mai that."

"Not what I want to hear."

"Why are you asking an amateur anyway?"

"Fine, be that way."

She turned away, frustrated. But not long after, she was practicing faces again. She'd been like this for two or three days now. It had been constant trial and error, making every moment count, trying to do the best she could. Nodoka herself must've been aware it wasn't the same as the real Mai. And that was gnawing at her and driving her to practice harder.

As he watched her desperate rehearsal, the train reached Fujisawa Station. End of the line.

"I've got work today," he said as they exited.

"You said that this morning."

"Go straight home, no detours."

"I'm filming tomorrow! I don't have time for detours."

They split up just outside the gates. He watched Nodoka head off toward home. Once she got back, he was sure she'd continue

practicing for the commercial. Becoming the person she hated.

Once she was completely out of sight, he muttered, "I don't get women..."

Sakuta reached the family restaurant he worked at ten minutes before his shift started.

"Good morning!" he said, greeting the manager. He headed to the break room to change. It was already occupied. By a smallish girl with a very modern short haircut who was sitting on a stool. His junior from Minegahara High, Tomoe Koga.

She was already in her waitress uniform. She had a fashion magazine spread out on the break-room table and was intently studying the latest trends.

The headline at the top of the page said, "Must-Haves for Autumn Girl Power!"

"Morning," he said over her shoulder.

"Oh, senpai. Mornin'."

"Do you actually need more girl power?"

"Who said you could look?"

She leaned forward, trying to hide the article with her body. He didn't think it was anything to be embarrassed about, but...

"What is your current girl-power rating?" he asked.

He ducked behind the lockers at the back of the break room. This was where the men had to change.

"...Like, five?"

That seemed low.

"Nah, you've gotta be at least 530,000."

"No way! I'm not Sakurajima. She's so cute on this cover!"

"Mm? She's on it?"

He was only half-changed, but he came out to look anyway. *Mai* was a magic word for him.

"Eep! Senpai, clothes!"

Tomoe turned red and held the magazine up to block her face. Mai was on the cover. She was wearing a fall coat. It made her look all grown-up, but she also sported a mischievous smile. A flawless expression.

"Get dressed, seriously! I'm calling the cops!"

Tomoe took out her phone as she made the threat.

"But I've got a shirt on."

"It's the lack of pants that's a problem!"

"I've got boxers on, too."

"If you didn't, I'd have called 110 already!"

Figuring he shouldn't push his luck any further, he went back into the changing space. He put on the uniform trousers and his apron,

then emerged once more.

Tomoe had her cheeks puffed up and was refusing to meet his eye. Fuming.

He sat down across from her and glanced at the magazine again.



Yep, once again, Mai's expression was lovely. Something about it was fundamentally more natural than Nodoka's Mai act ever was.

He flipped through the pages. Mai was in several other photos at the front. In a white knit cap, an elegant skirt, and a casual hoodie.

Some pictures had her with other models, including Millia Kamiita—the model Mai had said was a friend. They were posed to look like they were enjoying tea on an open terrace.

"You can't have it," Tomoe said, snatching it out of his hands. "I'm still not done. This is important research!"

"That's okay. I can just see the real one."

But when would he see the real Mai again? The forecast seemed dim. Downright dark.

Worrying about that, he punched his time card. And Tomoe's.

"Senpai."

"Mm?"

He looked over his shoulder and found her looking grossed out.

"That was a *really* creepy line," Tomoe said.

Sakuta reached out to mess up her hair, but she saw it coming and dodged backward, grinning triumphantly.

He'd have to get her back later.

By four that afternoon, the restaurant had settled down. It was too late for lunch, but too early for dinner. The only business they had was people taking a late tea.

Even with half the seats full, most customers were only ordering the drink bar and dessert. At most, a light meal. The servers and the kitchen were easily handling the work.

Things would really get crazy around six as they hit the dinner rush.

Since Tomoe was working hard, Sakuta was mostly delivering food to tables and working the register.

He'd just finished ringing up another couple when the bell on the front door rang.

"Senpai, can you take them?" Tomoe asked, arms laden with dirty dishes.

"If my cute kohai requests it, I don't have much choice, do I?"

"Handling customers is your job, too!" she scolded, apparently well aware he'd been slacking off on that front today.

"So you finally admit you're cute?"

"I'm just sick of correcting you."

She rolled her eyes and vanished into the back.

With no one left to tease, Sakuta headed back to the register to seat the new arrivals.

“Welcome,” he said.

“One,” said the girl at the door. The clean-cut sailor uniform from the fancy girls’ school clashed with her flashy blond hairdo.

“This way,” he said. Then, under his breath: “What brings you here, Mai?”

He led her to a seat, and Mai—in Nodoka’s body—sat down.

“Thought I’d grab a bite to eat before singing practice. Was feeling peckish.”

“I see.”

She didn’t have lessons today, and on days like that, Mai usually went to a karaoke box to practice her songs. Only an hour or two a day. She was careful of the strain on her voice. Once she got home, she would often practice her dance routines in Sakuta’s room.

Mai wasn’t desperately throwing herself into this task to get her mind off things. She was just diligently putting in the time required.

That didn’t mean she was slacking off, either. She dutifully underwent the tedious, repetitive rehearsals without complaint. A very stoic approach to work.

Mai seemed to be well aware that the most reliable way to getting better was to take one step at a time. That this was the fastest route to success. She didn’t panic or work too hard. She paid close attention to the physical toll it was taking on her.

This was the total opposite of Nodoka, who was clearly straining herself. Mai remained flawlessly professional.

Mai flipped the pages of the menu, then put it down. She reached for her bag and took a phone out of the pocket.

This was Nodoka’s. To become each other, they’d had to swap phones.

Mai glanced over the message on the screen.

“Her mother again?” Sakuta asked.

Mai glanced up at him. “Yeah. Fifty so far today.”

All from Nodoka’s mother.

Considering her daughter had run away from home, it made sense she’d try to get in touch. She must’ve been worried.

But from what Mai had told him about these texts, her methods were a bit screwy. He hadn’t actually seen them himself—Mai was protecting Nodoka’s privacy—but they were less about “Come home soon!” than “Are you at your singing lesson?” or “Did you rehearse your choreography today?” or “Try to get yourself in the center for the new number.” Nearly all of them were about her work as an idol.

Based on Mai’s confused look, this was another of those.

“I’ll have this,” Mai said as she put the phone away and pointed to the top of the pasta page.

“Spaghetti in tomato sauce,” he said, punching it into his order

pad. According to the work manual, he should've given her a polite bow and then been on his way.

Instead, Sakuta pretended he was still taking her order.

"She was practicing your faces again today, prepping for the commercial shoot tomorrow."

They both knew who he meant.

"Why bring that up now?" Mai said with a frown.

"I figured that was what really brought you here."

"I just wanted to see my boyfriend again," she said with the utmost aplomb.

"Wow, I'm so excited," he deadpanned.

It would've been genuinely exciting if her claim was even remotely true. But if it were, Mai would absolutely not say so aloud. Which meant the thing she wasn't saying now was the "truth."

"Can't you just be happy?" she retorted, annoyed.

She clearly wasn't being honest. He knew full well she was here about Nodoka. But because of their big fight, she couldn't check up on her in person. Which was exactly why Sakuta had brought it up...only for her to react like this.

Of course, if Sakuta had said nothing, she would have driven her heel into his foot on the grounds that he knew exactly why she'd come and was just playing dumb. That much was obvious.

So what option did he have left? All choices being wrong choices was hardly acceptable. She was being entirely unfair. It was making him fall for her even harder.

"Wipe that smirk off your face."

"I was thinking about you, Mai. Couldn't help it."

"Well, fine."

"If you've got advice, I'm all ears."

"Did Nodoka say she wanted any?"

"No."

"Then I've got nothing to say."

"But you *are* worried."

"It's my body and my job. Of course I'm worried."

This, she definitely meant. It would be weirder not to worry about leaving your body in someone else's control.

"Fair enough."

"Now quit slacking and get back to work."

"You sure you shouldn't just talk to her?"

"Sakuta. Drop it."

But her eyes fled his gaze. This wasn't like her.

"She'll be fine," Mai said, staring straight ahead. "If she remembers what they taught her in the theater troupe, she can do it."

"You make it sound like she's forgotten it."

Mai didn't answer.

"Senpai! Register!" Tomoe called.

"Your cute kohai's calling."

She picked that phrase deliberately. This was the face she made when she was enjoying putting him on the spot. He figured she would ignore any further discussion of Nodoka.

And he was on the clock, so the job took priority. He left Mai at her table and worked the register.

A stream of customers arrived, keeping him busy for a while. By the time things settled down, Mai had already gone home, so there was nothing more he could do.

"If Mai says she'll be fine...maybe she will be."

But the uneasy feeling in his chest didn't go away.

2

September 12 was as bright and sunny as Sakuta's heart was gloomy. The morning sky was a clear blue, and the sun peeked over the horizon without a single cloud in the way.

The windows of that morning's first train afforded a beautiful view of the sunlight glittering atop the ocean water like glittering jewels.

"Hwaah."

Squinting at how bright it was, Sakuta yawned.

It was far too early.

He'd woken up at 5 and left the house in his school uniform only twenty-five minutes later, at 5:25 AM. After a ten-minute walk, he'd boarded the 5:36 AM train. The first car that rolled out of the Enoden Fujisawa Station.

Now it was maybe 5:50. They'd just left the sixth stop, Koshigoe.

Unsurprisingly, there were no other Minegahara students this early. Only a handful of people on the train at all. The only passengers were young men in suits who looked like they'd just started working at their respective companies that year.

"Hwaaaah."

Sakuta yawned again, and the train stopped at Kamakura High School Station. He slowly got to his feet.

Sakuta's school was at the next stop, Shichirigahama Station, but he wasn't up this early to go *there*.

Rubbing sleep from the corners of his eyes, he stepped out onto the platform.

There was already a lot of activity. This was a tiny station and,

outside of school hours, usually deserted—not even station attendants were around for the most part. But today, the place was busy.

Men carrying around giant cameras, people carrying white boards—reflectors, to bounce the light.

There was a woman with short hair carrying a long pole with a microphone on the end. She brushed past Sakuta with a quick apology.

All these people were working on the commercial shoot.

He watched for a minute, but then a young female crew member came over to him. “Sorry, please use the gate over there,” she said. “We’re about to film.”

She led him out of the station, polite and professional even with a high school kid.

There was no sign of “Mai Sakurajima.”

But he had a pretty good idea where she was. There was a white microbus parked right outside the station. The windows were frosted and he couldn’t see inside, but “Mai Sakurajima” was probably getting ready for the shoot. Changing into her costume, getting her makeup done, or having any last-minute discussions that might’ve come up.

Sakuta headed over the railroad crossing and down to the Route 134 sidewalk. The road followed the coast, and the tracks ran parallel to it, so from here, he could look up at the platform like a stage.

This early, no crowds had gathered. Sakuta was the only one here.

Mai had told him last night that they often worked at off-hours like this. Even the photos in Tomoe’s fashion magazine—the ones at the fancy café—had been taken at six AM. They just made it look like the middle of the day with lighting.

“I’m definitely not cut out for show business.”

Even now, if Mai hadn’t forced him up and out of the house, he would never have made it.

Then a crew member called out, “Mai Sakurajima on set!”

The door to the microbus opened, and “Mai Sakurajima” stepped out. She was wearing a fairly normal-looking school uniform. A navy-blue blazer. She was probably supposed to be a high school student. Since it was a winter uniform, this commercial likely wouldn’t air until later this fall.

Even this early it was on the warmer side, so the long sleeves must’ve been particularly uncomfortable. But she had to act like it was peak autumn and not give away how hot it was. A feat Sakuta could never accomplish.

The crew all stopped working to applaud the arrival of “Mai Sakurajima.” It was a fairly subdued round of applause, mindful of the locals.

“Mai Sakurajima” stepped forward, bowed, and said, “Looking

forward to working with you.”

Only Sakuta knew this was really Nodoka Toyohama.

“Okay, let’s do a run-through before the train gets here.”

The man in charge was maybe late thirties or early forties. He was wearing shorts and a short-sleeved jacket; a very youthful style, but there were definitely some gray hairs peeking out. Based on the crew’s response, he was unmistakably the director.

“Places.”

Nodoka bowed again and took her position on the station bench. The camera lens turned toward her.

“We’ve got time before the next train?” the director asked.

“Four minutes out.”

“Okay, action.”

At the signal, everything started moving.

The whole vibe changed. The crew had been bustling around, but suddenly they were all dead silent, all focused on one thing—“Mai Sakurajima’s” performance.

The tension made him gulp. It was like needles poking him all over. Sakuta got goose bumps on his arms, and he was only watching.

As “Mai Sakurajima,” Nodoka’s task was to spot her friend approaching from the direction of the camera, hesitate, and then smile. All in a few moments.

“Okay, cut.”

A scant ten seconds had passed. It felt much longer.

The director checked the footage on the monitor.

A woman with a hip pouch came running up to Nodoka and adjusted her hair. Presumably, she was in charge of hair and makeup. Her hands were all over “Mai.” Sakuta was jealous.

The director moved away from the monitor, came over to “Mai Sakurajima,” and started telling Nodoka something, gesticulating a bit. Nodoka nodded repeatedly. Even from this distance, though, Sakuta could tell she was tense. The makeup hid it well, but she was probably turning pale.

She was undoubtedly doing her best to keep up appearances as “Mai Sakurajima” and managed a smile. Still, Sakuta found that smile painful to look at.

The alarm bells started. An inbound train from Kamakura.

“Train coming. Once it’s gone, we’ll start shooting.”

The green-and-cream car stopped at the station, clearly not caring about the film crew. No one got on or off. It pulled out, the back of it slowly moving away. It was soon out of earshot.

The wind had mussed “Mai’s” bangs, so the makeup artist quickly fixed them. Nodoka stared at the ground, taking several deep breaths.

“Ready,” the makeup artist said, putting the last touch on her

hair. She darted off set.

The camera operator put the focus on “Mai Sakurajima.” The gaffer held the lights up, and a big man farther back raised the bounce board. The boom operator got the mic in place.

Once again, all eyes concentrated on “Mai Sakurajima.” All these adults, intent on making one thing together.

This time, it dawned on Sakuta what emotions were suffusing this moment.

He’d thought it was tension at first. A nervous energy so intense that it had made him gulp.

He’d felt it pricking his skin.

But the true nature of this intensity? Everyone present, all the staff, the director, the camera operator, the makeup artist, the gaffer—everyone *trusted* “Mai Sakurajima.”

She was the youngest one here, true, but she was one of them, a colleague they had faith in.

Their attitudes proved they accepted “Mai” as a professional. And they were currently working hard to produce work worthy of her skills.

“.....”

This should have been comforting.

Being trusted, needed, enjoying working together—that would make anyone happy.

But this display of confidence was clearly making Nodoka anxious, and just looking at her was making Sakuta squirm. He felt a knot growing in his stomach.

“Take one...action!” the director called.

Once again, tension filled the air. Nodoka looked up at last. She squinted. Light playing off the water must have hit her eyes and disoriented her.

But that wasn’t all.

Nodoka’s body swayed. She couldn’t keep herself upright and toppled over sideways. She tried to put a hand on the bench to catch herself but failed. Her full weight fell hard against the bench surface.

“Cut!” the director yelled, seemingly concerned for his actor’s condition.

The makeup artist rushed over. A woman in a suit right behind. “Mai? Mai?” she called. Maybe that was her manager.

Sakuta hurried back across the railroad crossing, taking advantage of the confusion to get close to the station. He stood by the gates like a scarecrow, watching.

Nodoka’s breathing was ragged as she gasped for air. Like she was trying to throw up but couldn’t. A worried-looking crew girl was rubbing her back.

“Breathe slowly,” she said several times. Nodoka barely managed a nod.

Five minutes passed, and her breathing settled down. However, after seeing the state that “Mai Sakurajima” was in, nobody suggested they try again.

Nodoka was escorted back to the microbus by two crew girls.

The rest of the staff just stood there, stunned. Like nobody could believe that had just happened.

“Mai Sakurajima” did not emerge from the bus again. Sakuta waited around for another half hour, but eventually the bus drove away.

He heard the crew saying she’d been taken to the hospital. Probably for the best, he thought.

In the end, filming was canceled without getting a single shot.

Once the microbus took Nodoka away, Sakuta headed back home.

According to the station clock, it had only just turned seven. Too early to go to school. But he couldn’t think of anywhere to kill the time, either.

He slipped past the crew as they packed up their equipment, and he hopped on a train back to Fujisawa.

Fifteen minutes absently rocking on the train later, and he reached the end of the line. Then he walked back home.

“Wish my hunches didn’t always turn out right,” he muttered.

He hadn’t thought it would be *this* bad, though.

“Sakuta,” a voice called as he was passing the park.

Before he could turn around, he heard hurried footsteps coming over, then stopping beside him. A blond girl in a T-shirt, track pants, and running shoes.

She normally wore her hair all to one side, but now it was tied in back, out of the way.

She’d clearly been running for a while. She was dripping with sweat, the T-shirt plastered to her. He could clearly see the tank top beneath it.

Mai was exercising like this every day. This wasn’t something she did as herself, but something she was doing as “Nodoka Toyohama,” maintaining the endurance required to get through her regular performances.

He’d suggested she come watch the shoot with him, but she’d refused. “I need to go for my morning run.” And apparently that’s exactly what she did.

“You’re back,” she said, like it was nothing.

“Yep.”

“What happened?”

She meant Nodoka, of course.

“You can’t tell from the look on my face?”

“I can tell it didn’t go well, but...she did a few extra takes and got it done in the end, right?”

Mai clearly had no doubt in her mind. The way she’d been acting last night, she had clearly assumed Nodoka would get through it somehow.

“Nope, never got that far.”

“What do you mean?”

She looked up at him, her expression clouding over. The grim look on his face would do that.

“She collapsed before they could do a single take.”

“Huh?”

She’d been completely unprepared for that. It was rare to see Mai this surprised.

“What? Was she sick?”

“Physically, I don’t think so.”

“Then what?”

“You really don’t get it?”

“I wasn’t there, so how would I?”

She put her hands on her hips. She’d been out of breath from the run but had almost recovered already.

“I figured you’d know better than anyone.”

“Know what?”

“How intense the trust placed on ‘Mai Sakurajima’ is. How high the expectations.”

“.....”

Mai still seemed confused.

Maybe this was one of those things she’d never get no matter what he said. Those conditions were just her “everyday.” That was why the crew had been so shocked when “Mai Sakurajima” collapsed. Nobody had the slightest clue what had happened. It seemed unlikely any of them would ever figure it out.

Sakuta only noticed because he was an outsider. What he felt was a given for all of them. The absolute faith the film crew placed in “Mai Sakurajima,” the overwhelming expectations. That was the way things were supposed to be, but since Nodoka was only pretending to be Mai, it was unbearable.

“All of that really was like being trapped in a pressure cooker. I mean, I’m speculating, but...”

“...I see.”

She spoke like she understood, but it really didn’t seem like she did. None of this made sense to Mai.

The rest of the way home, Mai said nothing. Sakuta didn't say anything, either. It seemed like Mai was busy thinking.

Back at home, Sakuta got breakfast ready. For him and Kaede. Mai said she'd already eaten, and she hit the shower to wash off her sweat.

So it was just Sakuta and Kaede at the breakfast table. The menu for the day was toast, ham, and eggs. The latter two items were very specifically served separately, so the Oxford comma there is rather important.

Sakuta took a bite of golden-brown toast. There was an appetizing crunch. He folded an egg up in a slice of ham and ate that too. Once he got that down, breakfast was over.

Meanwhile, Kaede was waiting for the margarine to melt into her toast. She refused to have any until it was.

She must have gotten it exactly the way she liked it, because a beautiful smile appeared on her face.

"The crisp part and the soaked part acting in harmony!"

"Nice."

If his sister was happy, so was he.

As he enjoyed that small pleasure, there was a sound in the hall. Mai was done with her shower. A moment later, they heard the dryer running. When that noise ended, the flip-flop of her slippers announced her approach.

"Thanks for the shower," she said, poking her face into the living room. She was wearing shorts that left her thighs dazzlingly bare and a short-sleeved hoodie—definitely indoor clothes.

"Quit staring at my legs!" she added when she caught him looking. She sounded just like Nodoka. "Morning, Kaede."

"Good morning, Nodoka!" Kaede said once she'd swallowed her toast.

They'd decided it was better not to tell Kaede the truth, so Mai was living here as Nodoka.

At first, Kaede had definitely been terrified of this new blond girl, but after feeding Nasuno together and talking about books they'd read, she'd let her guard down. Telling her Nodoka was Mai's sister was likely also a big factor in how quickly they'd grown close.

Kaede had literally said, "If you're Mai's sister, you must be nice!" Sakuta wasn't sure that logic was sound, but he took it as a sign Kaede really did trust Mai, which made him happy. There was nothing better than having your family get along with your girlfriend.

"I'm just gonna change," Mai said and went back down the hall, vanishing into Sakuta's room.

"Breakfast was great!" Kaede said. She'd cleaned her plate.

"Glad to hear it."

He took the empty dishes to the sink, then quickly washed and placed them on the drying rack.

With that taken care of, Sakuta went to his room. He wanted to talk to Mai before she left.

Figuring she was done changing by now, he didn't think twice about turning the knob. It was his room to begin with.

"Eep!" There was a stifled shriek as he opened the door.

The blond in his room turned toward him, looking alarmed. She'd been fastening the hooks on her skirt. Tragically, this meant she was basically fully dressed.

Yet Mai wordlessly grabbed a pillow and threw it as hard as she could.

"Mmph!"

Clean hit to the face. The door slammed shut.

"Knock, dumbass!"

That was a very Nodoka response.

He did as he was told and knocked.

"I meant in general!"

He didn't answer this one. Instead, he put the pillow under his arm and leaned against the door.

"So, Mai..."

"Before you change the subject, apologize and swear you'll never do it again."

This response was more Mai's style.

"Sorry. I won't do it again."

Her response was an exasperated sigh.

"Well? What is it?"

"Was wondering if you should hit up the hospital," he said, getting right to the point.

"From what you told me, the psychological pressure led to her hyperventilating, so she'll be fine."

Hyperventilating. Sakuta knew the word. It meant something like breathing uncontrollably fast until it became unbearable. A symptom of extreme stress; he'd seen something about it on TV before.

"Do you even know which hospital?"

"You can find that out by asking her."

"What for?"

"A moment of weakness can be the perfect chance to make up."

"How underhanded."

A harsh statement, but there was humor in her voice. Mai knew full well he didn't mean that literally. Personally, he felt even if it was a bit underhanded, it was worth it if they really did manage to make up somehow.

"You can come in."

She must've been done changing now.

He opened the door and stepped in.

"I'm starting to feel like this isn't even my room anymore..."

It had turned into Rio's room over summer vacation, and now it was Mai's.

"Serves you right."

"Huh? How so?"

"And who exactly keeps bringing girls home?"

She shot him a gleeful smile. The one she always used when she knew she had him against the ropes. It was Nodoka's face, but the way she carried herself was unmistakably Mai.

But she didn't pursue that point further. She put a mirror on the desk and started doing her makeup. Nodoka's makeup. The elaborate cat-eye framing.

Sakuta watched her for a while. Eventually, Mai broke the silence.

"I do feel bad," she said.

"Mm?"

"Coming here like this, making you a part of it."

"I don't care about that."

"But?"

"Living with you is so stimulating I'm not sure how much longer I can restrain myself."

"So you want me to hurry up and patch things over with Nodoka?"

"I supposed that would be one solution."

"One solution? It's your entire point."

"I mean, it's true that this is getting in the way of our intimacy."

"Does stepping on you count?"

Applying lipstick, she finished up and rose to face him.

"Please," he said.

She gave him an exasperated sigh. Then she came over to him, reached up, and cupped his cheeks in her hands. She must have abandoned the foot stomp idea.

"Mai..."

"Not stimulating enough?"

"Mild contact like this is just lighting my fuse."

"Your point being?"

"I want to throw myself at you."

"Not even if I'm in *my* body."

"Then I want you to throw yourself at me."

"Quit eyeing your bed."

"Would you prefer the floor?"

"I'll allow you to imagine it."

He decided to take advantage of this offer. He pictured Mai in the

bunny-girl outfit. It was great.

“Oh, and take this,” Mai said, interrupting his fantasies by putting something in his hand. It was small enough to fit in his palm. Slightly cold to the touch, very hard—metal.

He looked down and saw a silvery gleam. A key.

“Is this...?”

“The key to my place,” Mai said curtly.

“You’re giving me a spare?”

“No.”

“The key to your heart?”

This joke got his foot stomped.

“Ow! Ow!”

“I’m temporarily loaning it to you.”

“Aww.”

“Don’t you dare make a copy.”

“.....”

“That was a suspicious silence.”

“You put the idea in my head.”

She gave him another exasperated sigh. Her foot was still on his.

“You’ll get a spare key when I feel like you deserve one,” she muttered.

She was definitely a bit embarrassed by this but refused to avert her eyes.

“Will that be next week?”

“Try, like, five years from now.”

“Aww.”

“Spare keys aren’t given out easily, horndog.”

This time Mai did turn away. The embarrassed look on her stoic face was very cute, but if he said that, she’d go, “You mean Nodoka’s face?” and that would be a quagmire, so he kept this to himself.

“You can have my spare any time.”

“No thanks.”

Instant rejection. How tragic.

“Can we at least shoot for three years?”

“Why are you asking like that’s a serious proposition?”

“I want your spare key as soon as humanly possible.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll consider it. Depends on how things turn out.”

“Good enough for me!”

Sakuta even pumped his fist. But he felt he’d earned the right. Getting a spare key from your girlfriend was just that big a deal.

“So do your part.”

He didn’t need to ask what part. Mai had given him the key because she was worried about Nodoka. She was telling him to check in on her and take care of her if it was needed.

"If you're worried, you could just go yourself."

"....."

"Of course, if you could do that, you wouldn't need to give me a key."

"...I don't know what to say to her," Mai said. A rare glimpse of weakness. "Even I don't know everything."

She gave him a sullen glare, like it was his fault for forcing this admission. She clearly resented having to spell it out.

"Sounds like a good place to start."

"No way."

"Why not?"

"....."

She didn't answer. But he had a pretty good idea. Considering their relationship...

"I guess you do have your pride as the big sister to consider."

"Say another word, and I'll get angry."

She was clearly already angry. She usually was when she said things like this. He threw his hands up, surrendering.

"You're getting a little too full of yourself, Sakuta."

Mai gave him an extra-hard poke in the forehead. It hurt, but this seemed to satisfy her, because she smiled again. Maybe she'd let off a little pent-up steam.

"Ah, it's already time. I'd better go."

Mai picked up her bag and left the room.

Sakuta walked her to the door.

As she put on her shoes, she said, "Oh, right," and turned back to face him.

"What?"

"No matter what, don't open the cupboards in the tatami room."

There was no tatami room in this apartment, so she must've meant the one in hers.

"No matter what?"

"Yes. No matter what."

"Got it."

"Okay, I'm gonna get going, then," she said, snapping back into Nodoka mode.

"Don't get lost, now."

"Like I would!"

She was a wonderful actress. Nothing about the interaction seemed at all unnatural. You couldn't even tell she was acting. It was downright terrifying how all traces of Mai Sakurajima vanished when she was being Nodoka Toyohama.

"And don't you be late, either," she said.

And then she was gone.

The door closed, leaving him behind.

“No matter what?” he muttered again. The door did not respond.

3

Sakuta headed to school fifteen minutes after Mai left. He considered checking out her place first, but if Nodoka wasn't back from the hospital yet, he didn't really have a reason to be there.

School was the same as it ever was. Nothing out of the ordinary. Nobody even knew they'd been filming a commercial one station down the line. Much less that it involved a student from their school—Mai. No one was talking about it.

During breaks, friends gathered together, talking about this or that. Wishing for cute girlfriends, cool boyfriends, food, or anything interesting to happen. Same topics as the day before.

As someone who never felt very comfortable in that kind of space, today Sakuta felt even more out of it.

This must have shown on his face more than he thought. He was staring out the window during lunch when someone came over to him.

“You look grumpy.”

“If I look grumpy, I probably am.”

He turned toward the voice. Yuuma Kunimi was sitting in the seat in front of him, leaning over the back of the chair, legs on either side of it.

“Something go down?”

“Uh, Kunimi,” Sakuta said, ignoring the question and deflecting Yuuma's attention. The powerful glare from a nearby girl forced his hand.

“Mm?”

“It would be real helpful if you didn't talk to me in this classroom.”

“Why not?”

“Because your adorable girlfriend looks ready to kill me.”

Behind Yuuma, near the teacher's podium, was a group of distinctly dazzling girls. And one of them was glaring daggers.

Saki Kamisato.

One of the social leaders of Sakuta's class, and Yuuma's girlfriend.

“With her eyes alone?” Yuuma asked. He glanced back, and Saki's expression changed instantly. All traces of hostility vanished. She met Yuuma's gaze and gave him a cute little wave.

“I don't see it,” Yuuma said, turning back.

Sakuta sighed and looked at the podium again. Saki was clearly pissed.

“You’re just pretending to not notice, right?”

“Am I?”

Yuuma wasn’t taking the bait. But he totally knew. The way he’d turned and looked right at her proved he was well aware.

“I think the way she’s so obvious is pretty cute.”

“Don’t dote on her desire to murder me.”

“So why are you grumpy?”

“I’m not particularly grumpy. I’m just wondering how it feels to have an accomplished older sister.”

“A what?”

“I’ve never been stuck getting compared with one.”

“Well...you’re a guy, so...”

Sakuta wasn’t explaining the situation in a way that could be understood. But Yuuma seemed to have some thoughts on the matter anyway.

“I’m an only child myself,” he said.

“I know. I expect nothing from you here.”

“Brutal,” Yuuma said, laughing out loud.

Sakuta glanced toward the podium, and his eyes met Saki’s as she reacted to Yuuma’s laughter. She scowled at him. “Don’t you make my Yuuma laugh!” her look seemed to say. What a pain.

“Maybe ask someone who’s got an accomplished sister?” Yuuma suggested. He turned toward the chalkboard and, of all things, beckoned Saki over.

Saki glanced at the girls around her, but they urged her forward, and she came over to them.

“Man,” Sakuta said, but before he could protest further...

“I don’t like having my friends and girlfriend fighting,” Yuuma said.

“What?” Saki asked, stopping next to Yuuma.

“Sakuta’s got something to ask you.”

Saki’s eyes bored through him. It wasn’t like Sakuta was pleased about this development, but it was a request from a friend. And Sakuta wouldn’t want his friends and girlfriend fighting, either.

“Kamisato, you’ve got an older sister?”

“I do...but how do you not know that?”

“It’d be far weirder if I actually knew *anything* about your family.”

Was it something that would show up on a web search?

“She was a student here last year.”

“Oh?”

“And the student council president. You must have seen her before.”

“...Not that I can recall.”

He took a moment to think about it but came up empty.

“Are you being serious right now?”

This made it sound like she'd been a very conspicuous student.

“You never disappoint,” Yuuma said in admiration. But if Sakuta couldn't remember the girl, there wasn't much he could do about it.

“She didn't come after me like you do, so I don't know her.”

Saki had made a much stronger impression. It would be basically impossible to ever forget her. He'd likely go the rest of his life without anyone else making the sort of demands she had.

“Can I go now?” Saki asked, already getting fed up.

“Hang in there a bit longer,” Yuuma said.

Quite an exchange. Apparently, talking to Sakuta required serious effort. He was offended. There was only so much good will he owed Yuuma.

“So if she was the president, I guess that makes her a high-achiever.”

“She passed the exam for the best university in Japan on her first try,” Saki said, like talking about it bored her. She looked at Yuuma, clearly asking again if she could go.

“Just a little longer,” he said.

But this next question was probably the last one Sakuta would get. He decided to get straight to the point and ask what he really wanted to know.

“Do you love your sister?”

“Not especially,” Saki said, not looking at him.

“So you hate her?”

“Not especially.”

The exact same answer.

“Hmm. That clears it all up.”

“Huh? How so?”

“I've realized that it isn't something simple enough to boil down to words like *love* or *hate*.”

“.....”

You could say *love*, but it wasn't like you wanted to be with 'em 24-7. You could say *hate*, but then they'd still be there when you got home. Since they were so close by and such a major part of your life, you saw all sides to them. Good or bad, you couldn't miss it. And the emotions resulting from that level of contact couldn't be summed up easily. There were too many different factors that bled into one another. Even if there was a single source...the huge range of emotions involved could get so tangled that you could easily forget what lay at the center of it all.

“Not like I hate her or anything,” Saki said, to nobody in

particular. "I just hate it when Mom is all, 'Why can't you study like your sister does?' or 'Why don't you have your sister help you study?' That's all."

And with that, she went back to her friends, without a word to Yuuma.

"Well? You get it now?"

"It helped. Tell her I'm grateful."

"That's not something you should ask others to handle."

"I hate it when you're right."

"Whatever. The gulf between you two close at all?"

"If it looks like it has, you should get your eyes examined."

"Figured."

Yuuma made a face. Not like it was a problem, more like this was the outcome he'd expected.

"Even if we do ever get to a point where we're not at each other's throats, I don't see us being friends," Sakuta said, looking away.

Rio's face floated into his mind. If he asked her, she'd definitely say she didn't mind. But he was sure it would bother her, deep down.

"Yeah, that's just who you are, Sakuta."

The bell rang. Lunch was over.

"Later."

"Mm."

Yuuma got up to head back to his class. He stopped to say a quick word to Saki on the way out.

In his wake, Saki gave Sakuta the nastiest glare she'd mustered yet.

"Yeah, we're definitely not gonna be friends."

4

He slept through his afternoon classes. A natural consequence of waking up at five AM.

After school, he went straight home. He was getting really worried about what happened to Nodoka after she collapsed.

He found a familiar microbus parked outside her building. Same one from the location shoot that morning.

He scoped it out in passing. There were people in the driver's and passenger seats, both on their phones.

As he looked, the glass doors to Mai's building slid open, and a twentysomething woman in a suit came out. She spoke to the man in the driver's seat, then opened the back door and climbed aboard. The bus drove off toward the main street.

If they'd left, Nodoka must've been doing better.

"I'll find out once I get there."

He took the key out of his pocket.

"...Can't just go in without announcing myself, though."

He stopped outside the doors and put the key away.

He punched her room number into the intercom and hit the call button.

"...Yes?"

He hadn't been sure she'd answer, but she didn't keep him waiting. It might've been Nodoka on the inside, but that was definitely Mai's voice.

"It's Azusagawa."

"What do you want?"

"Can I come up? I mean, even if you say no, I can just use the spare key Mai gave me."

"....."

She hung up without another word. Then the door lock released, and the doors slipped open.

He'd cleared the first barrier.

He took the elevator straight to the ninth floor. Then headed all the way to the back, to the corner condo.

He rang the bell outside the door.

After a moment, the door opened. Just enough to poke her face out. Her eyes found Sakuta, then looked around for anyone else.

"Just you?"

"As you can see."

Nodoka let out a small sigh of relief. She opened the door the rest of the way and waved him in.

He took his shoes off and followed her into the apartment.

"Mai went to school in the morning. By now, she's probably at practice for the mini concert Sunday at the Nagoya shopping mall."

"I didn't ask."

"She's wasn't mad."

"I said, I didn't ask."

"I talk to myself a lot."

"Ugh," she groaned.

Nodoka stopped in the living room, looking unsure what to do with herself. Like she hadn't figured out how she fit into the space.

Sakuta glanced around.

"...What a mess," he said, not mincing words.

It had been spick-and-span the last time he was here, but she'd really done a number on the place. Uniform blazers and camisoles thrown in a heap on the back of the couch, black tights rolled up and dropped on the floor like a reef. The cleaning robot turned around, its

path blocked. Sakuta shot a look of pity at its back. Not that you could tell which side was which.

The fancy counter kitchen had been taken over by countless convenience store bags, forming a white plastic forest. There were no signs of any actual cooking being done.

Based on the remains of convenience store lunches in the garbage, this was all Nodoka had eaten since her fight with Mai.

“When she gave me the key, it wasn’t because she had predicted *this*, right...?”

He wanted to think that wasn’t the case but honestly couldn’t be sure.

“Right, laundry first.”

He picked up the uniform blouses from the couch and started gathering the black tights from the floor.

“H-hey, what are you doing?!” Nodoka yelped.

He ignored her as he hauled an armful of clothes to the laundry room.

He popped open the washing machine lid, tossed the blouses in, and got the water running. He sorted the camisoles, putting any sturdy enough in with the blouses.

The tights were a bigger concern. Sakuta had never washed anything like them. They were all black, so he figured they had to be a separate load, if nothing else. And he suspected that if he didn’t use mesh laundry bags, they’d get all tangled up, which would be a disaster.

He poked around the laundry room and found a small white basket in the corner. Inside was a mountain of treasure—underwear. White, pink, blue, and black—panties and bras in all sorts of colors.

The mesh bags he was looking for were on the edge of this basket. He put the pale-colored panties in one and added it to the washing machine as it started churning.

Now he just had to put a few items in each of the remaining bags and wait.

“The rest will have to be handwashed, I guess?” he said, holding up a black bra by the shoulder straps.

“Y-you can’t...!” Nodoka wailed, rushing into the laundry room and trying to snatch it out of his hands. He evaded the swipe and her hand caught only air. “Don’t dodge!”

“I’m busy doing laundry here. Don’t interfere.”

“Don’t touch my sister’s underwear with your pervy hands!”

“Your fault for not doing the laundry yourself.”

“I—I know! I’ll do it! I promise!”

Nodoka desperately lunged at him, seemingly forgetting she was supposed to be depressed. This time she managed to snatch the bra

away.

She glared at Sakuta, her face bright red. Clearly electing to keep her word, she started filling the sink with warm water.

“Given the quantity, the bath might be better.”

“Sh-shut up! Don’t watch! Get out!”

Despite her grumbling, she listened to his advice and opened the door to the bathroom behind her.

Seemed like he could leave the rest to her.

“When that’s done, we’ll run the other load,” he said and went back to the living room. His eyes came to rest on the mountain of convenience store bags.

“You eat yet?” he called over his shoulder.

“Nothing since this morning,” she said.

“Then I’ll make you something.”

First, he cleaned away the forest of bags, then he got the rice cooker started.

An hour or so later, the laundry was finally done. Black tights were strung on the line by the windows like seaweed left out to dry. Nodoka had carried off the underwear to the bedroom.

“Enter, and you die,” she’d said mere minutes ago.

Sakuta had helped cleaned up and taken out the trash. They were now sitting across from each other at the dining room table. Considering the size of the room, the table was weirdly small. Mai must have purchased it on the assumption she’d be eating alone. It was a bit cramped for two.

Laid out on the table were rice, miso soup, fried fish, and pickled *nozawana*. All stuff he’d found in the fridge. There was no indication Nodoka had ever cooked for herself, so this must’ve all been left over from Mai’s last shopping trip.

“Isn’t it a bit late for breakfast?”

“Dig in,” he said, ignoring her gripe. He started eating.

“...Fine,” Nodoka said, reaching for the miso soup.

She picked up the bowl and took a sip.

“Th-that’s actually good.”

“I had good stock.”

On the counter was...well, it looked like a piece of dry wood, but it was actually a really nice *katsuobushi* from Makurazaki. The same thing Mai had brought him as a souvenir from a shoot in Kagoshima. She seemed to have gotten some for herself as well.

“By the way,” he said.

Nodoka was picking bones out of the fish with her chopsticks. She glanced up, her eyes asking, “What?”

“Are you okay?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, you hyperventilated, right?”

“.....”

She looked aghast.

“Eh? Didn’t you?”

“No, I did, but you bring that up *now*?”

“Sorry, was it too soon?”

“Late!” she yelled, pointing her chopsticks in his direction.

“That’s bad manners, you know.”

“Your fault!” She grimaced but put them back down.

“So are you okay?”

“...They examined me at the hospital and said I was fine.”

“Well, good.”

“Not really...”

Her chopsticks had been reaching toward her rice, but they stopped, hovering in place. Her eyes locked onto the table.

“I...really screwed up.”

Her hands were shaking. Her lips quivering. Tremors ran through her whole body like she was terrified.

“That wasn’t her. At all. Sis would never screw up like that. That isn’t Mai Sakurajima.”

“Mai gets sick sometimes, too.”

She was only human. Nobody could be in peak condition every day.

“You don’t get it! She’s not like us! She’s never off her game.”

“.....”

“Even if she was running a fever so high she felt faint, Mai Sakurajima would wade into the freezing ocean in winter and perform flawlessly without ever showing it on her face! That’s who she is! But I got the shoot canceled and made trouble for everyone... I can’t do this.”

Nodoka put her arms around herself, trying to stop the shaking. But the chill in her heart was not so easily thawed.

“I’m done. I can’t. I want to quit. There’s no way I can ever handle that pressure.”

“.....”

“I had no idea. I didn’t know what it meant to be Mai Sakurajima. I didn’t have the slightest clue.”

“.....”

“She’s my sister, but I didn’t know anything about her.”

There were tears in her voice now. And her heart. But none on her face. Her eyes stayed dry, like her body physically refused to cry.

“People aren’t that easily understood,” Sakuta muttered, like he was talking to himself. He basically was. Nodoka was so busy letting

her emotions fly, she wasn't in any condition to hear a word he said.

"I've always looked up to her. I wanted to be like her, but I wish I never had."

He felt like she was getting a little off track here. It was like she'd forgotten her starting position and which direction she was headed.

But Sakuta thought that might be what she needed right now.

Everything Nodoka was saying might've made perfect sense to her, and even if it didn't, saying it aloud could still lead to greater understanding. Or at least calm her down. So it was good to get it all out there. Sakuta was fully capable of sitting and listening until she was done.

"Back in kindergarten..." Nodoka said, her voice barely a whisper.

"Mm?" Sakuta said, sipping his soup.

"There was this girl I was friends with. And she had an older sister..."

"Oh."

"A really nice one, who always shared her treats. I was so jealous of her. When I got home, I said I wanted a big sister, too. I'm cringing just remembering it..."

That must have been rough on her parents. Normally, you could just handle that by saying, "Well, you might be one yourself one day," but in Nodoka's case, she actually had an older sister—even if not in the way she'd imagined.

"I think I said it so many times my father finally gave in and told me."

"About Mai?"

"Yeah. She was already acting. He showed me her TV show and said, 'That's your sister.'"

"Must have been a shock."

"It was. But I was really happy. I thought having a sister on TV was great. I wanted to meet her."

Her father must have thought hard on that one. He would've needed to get Mai's mom on board first. And not just her. It wasn't simply a matter of picking a day. So maybe he'd found a different route.

"...Was that how you ended up in a theater troupe?"

"You're smarter than you look."

"I like surprising people."

"But you're right. My father said I might be able to meet her one day if I joined a troupe and work hard."

"So you only met her at the auditions?"

"I don't think my father really thought I'd be good enough to get called in for those. But I really liked acting. I thought, 'I'm doing the

same thing my sister is!' And just had fun with it."

And the adults noticed. It might not have landed her any parts, but she had something that set her apart.

"When you finally met her, what was it like?"

"She was so badass..."

"You'd think you were talking about some guy you met."

"She just was, okay?"

"Still is, I'll admit."

Most people couldn't focus on the task at hand when they had something on their mind. Normally, it wasn't considered something that could simply be done.

Mai was undoubtedly worried about Nodoka. That's why she'd given Sakuta the key. Of course part of Mai wanted to go check in on her.

But right now, she was Nodoka Toyohama, and she was prioritizing what that role required: going to school and throwing herself into idol work. In the long run, maintaining Nodoka's life would be good for Nodoka, and Mai was fully aware of this. Plus, there was no way to know when she'd be back in her own body...

And despite all that happening in the background, the way she didn't let any of it distract was pretty badass.

"Looking back now, I realize that my being there must have really rattled her."

"We don't normally run into surprise little sisters."

And this one had a different mother. Her father had abandoned her and started a new family. But even though Mai was wrestling with that, Nodoka was simply excited to finally meet her sister, which must have only heightened that sense of bewilderment.

"Regardless of what she was feeling inside, she treated me like her real sister."

"....."

"She patted me on the head and said, 'I always wanted a little sister!'"

"What a disturbing kid."

It was a little too perfect.

"I'm telling her you said that."

"Go ahead. As soon as you make up with her."

"...I can't ever face her again."

"Because you screwed up on the job?"

"Half that. But half..."

She hesitated to say the rest aloud.

"You *both* yelled 'I hate you.'"

"No she didn't. I was the only one yelling."

"For someone who dyes her hair blond, you sure do sweat the

small stuff.”

“This is huge!”

“Hate always is.”

Feeling proud of that line, he stood up and poured leftover miso soup into his bowl.

“Oh, can I get some, too?” Nodoka held out her bowl. He ladled some soup into it.

When she took it back, she stared into the bowl for a long moment. The miso billowing through the broth like clouds.

“Um,” Nodoka began.

“Mm?” Sakuta took a loud sip of soup. Really good stock.

“Did she...?”

“Did she what?”

“Say anything?”

It was barely audible, but the room was just quiet enough for him to hear.

“She didn’t seem worried.”

“...Oh.”

Hanging her head down, she cut a tragic figure. His words might have come as a shock. Probably because it seemed like Mai wasn’t even concerned about her.

“Seriously, stop looking so gloomy with her face. It’s making me wanna give you a hug.”

“Wha—What is your problem?! This is serious!”

Nodoka jumped to her feet, beet red.

“Girl, don’t stand up while you’re eating. And that’s not what I meant.”

“Huh?”

Instead of sitting back down, she just stared at him, frowning. Sakuta polished off his rice.

“I meant she wasn’t worried about the commercial shoot.”

“.....What?”

It took her a moment. She still didn’t quite seem to grasp what he was saying. Or maybe she just didn’t believe it. She gaped at him, a totally unguarded look Mai would never allow herself to make.

“I don’t get it.”

“Sure you do. It’s not exactly complicated.”

“.....”

“She figured you’d blow a couple takes, but she never doubted you’d eventually get the director’s approval.”

“...Really?”

“If you don’t believe me, ask her.”

“I can’t...”

“Then take my word for it.”

“I can’t do that, either.”

“Man, you’re selfish.”

“Sh-shut up! I mean, but...that means...”

She might be arguing with him, but her expression was visibly brighter.

“Why am I...? Oh no...”

She put her hands on her cheeks, trying to stop the smile, but when she brought them down, it snapped back in place. Nodoka was too pleased to stop herself.

“All you had to do was smile just like that.”

“Huh?”

“During the commercial. You kept forcing yourself to smile like Mai in rehearsals, but honestly, it just felt super fake.”

This one was way more natural. It was Nodoka’s own smile, so of course it was.

Then he remembered what Mai had told him the day before the shoot, in the restaurant.

———*“If she remembers what they taught her in the theater troupe, she can do it.”*

Maybe the reason Mai had been so sure she could do it was right here on Nodoka’s face. That felt like the right answer to Sakuta anyway.

“I—I knew that without you telling me.”

“You’re *such* a liar.”

“Sh-shut up! Shut up, shut up!”

She slapped her hands over both ears like a little kid, pretending she couldn’t hear him. But she was still beaming. Both her expression and voice had completely transformed.

Maybe this was what Nodoka was *really* like.

As he thought that, the phone on the table vibrated. This was Mai’s phone. The display said **Ryouko**. That was Mai’s manager’s name.

Nodoka grabbed the phone and answered with “Hello?,” sounding a little nervous.

“We’ve rescheduled?” she asked. Talking like Mai did. “Next week? Okay, Friday, same time... Yes, I’ll be fine. I’m really sorry about today. Yes, thank you.”

She slowly lowered the phone and pressed the button to hang up. Her newfound confidence was gone already.

“What now?!” she wailed, clutching her head.

“You just said you’d be fine!”

He’d seen her manager leave, and she hadn’t looked worried.

“What else am I supposed to say, jackass?!”

She was really taking this out on him.

“Fair enough.”

“Seriously, I’m so doomed.”

Airing out her anxieties, Nodoka looked at the desktop calendar by the TV. It was the twelfth now, so next Friday was seven days away. She kept scanning that gap.

Clearly, she was thinking about what she could do in the next week. For all her defeatist talk earlier, Nodoka was already preparing herself to meet the new shoot with everything she could muster.

Sakuta felt like it would work out this time. He didn’t have a clear basis for that belief, but it wasn’t like every matter in the world was settled with confidence and a solid foundation. It wasn’t the most comforting thought, but most things in life are actually left unresolved, whether they just happen to work themselves out, get left alone because someone decided it’s “good enough,” or because time simply runs out. People often move on with their lives without ever obtaining certainty or closure. But despite that, Nodoka was trying to do whatever she could. What more could anyone ask?

“Well, I’d better get home.”

“Huh?”

“I said, I’m going home.”

“You have the worst timing. There’s seriously something wrong with you.”

“Huh? How so?”

“Why would you think it was okay to just ditch me and leave now?”

“I don’t have any more advice to give.”

This was simply a fact.

“I know, but!”

“You’ve got a week. Do what you can.”

“I didn’t need you to tell me that!”

“Then what? You’re just so depressed you want me to stick around?”

“?!”

This made Nodoka go bright red. Half anger, half shame.

“G-go home! Go—get out of here!”

She pointed furiously at the entrance.

“I said I was... Quit pushing!”

Her palms struck his back several times, and he was soon at the door.

He put his shoes on and reached for the knob, but as he did, she said, “Oh, wait.”

“Mm?” He turned back, hand on the knob.

“Can you do something for me?” Nodoka asked hesitatingly.

“Nope.”

“.....”

She was visibly crestfallen. He really didn't like seeing Mai's body do this.

“At least say ‘Please, I need your help’ while staring up at me.”

“Will that work?”

“If it was Mai.”

“But if it's me?”

“Well, you look like Mai now, so I'll take that into consideration.”

“Ugh, so high-handed.”

“What is it?”

“Can you cook again?”

She stared up at him, looking embarrassed. This wasn't the way Mai would do it. Nodoka's approach was much less mature.

“You're still hungry?”

“Not right now, just...every day.”

“Sorry, I've already pledged my heart to Mai.”

“Huh?”

“You're the one who suddenly offered me a Showa-era proposal. I'm afraid I have to decline.”

“I—I did not! Don't decline—I mean, no! God, you're a pain in the butt! I just want to make sure I'm taking good care of this body!”

That had not been conveyed *at all*. But fair enough, the kind of food convenience stores offered didn't exactly help maintain a balanced diet.

“I can't afford to put on any weight, and if I don't eat right, it'll affect my skin tone and complexion.”

“I wouldn't mind if you make her a *little* curvier.”

“Stop leering at my sister, you animal! Anyway...please. I need your help.”

She asked quite sincerely, though she was also sulking about it and she sounded a little peeved. Not nearly enough confidence, impishness, or sweetness—but demanding all that from Nodoka was a bit much. She wasn't Mai, after all.

“Well, cooking isn't a big deal. Need me doing the laundry, too?”

“I can do that.”

“It's not a big deal. You seem busy.”

“If you touch her underwear again, I'll gut you.”

“Do tights count as underwear?”

“Huh? That's obvious.”

“Ah, I see. They don't, right?”

“They do!”

“Don't get so worked up! You've already been to the hospital once today.”

“This is your fault! Seriously, what is your problem? Argh, just go

home!”

She waved a hand, shooing him away.

Who was it who'd been keeping him from leaving in the first place? If memory served, it was Nodoka. Sakuta had always intended to go. But if he said that, they'd end up going another round, so he elected to beat a quiet retreat.

“See you tomorrow, then.”

“Mm.”

As he stepped out, Nodoka waved. The gesture seemed to come naturally to her, but she acted like it was a mistake and quickly lowered her hand. Then she snorted and closed the door behind him.

“What a weird girl,” he muttered, walking away. He waited for the elevator and got on. Then remembered something.

——— *“No matter what, don't open the cupboards in the tatami room.”*

Mai's words when she gave him the key.

He'd been so busy cleaning and cooking, it had totally slipped his mind.

“Well, I can look tomorrow.”

No need to do today what could be done tomorrow. All he had to do were the things that had to be done today.



it's NOT a sister
complex

1

Every Monday morning made the week to come feel like an eternity, but this week the time flew by for Sakuta just from planning menus.

Through the course of making tofu patties, sea bream carpaccio with tomato on top, daikon with miso sauce, *nikujaga*, and pesto pasta, and suddenly it was already Thursday.

He stopped for groceries on the way home again that day, then went to Mai's house to make Nodoka's dinner.

Avoiding high calories, he focused mostly on dishes that had lots of veggies. Tonight's main was eggplant gratin.

He'd made this dish Sunday, when Shouko brought Hayate by to play. Both Shouko and Kaede had loved it.

Nodoka ate it without complaint, so it must have been pretty good.

"Since when can guys make gratins?" she asked when she finished.

"Better to have a guy who can rather than a girl who can't, am I right?"

He cleared away the dirty dishes and washed up.

When that was done, he sat down next to Nodoka on the couch, where she was watching a DVD. His weight shifted the cushions and made her lean toward him.

She adjusted her balance without a word, sliding all the way to the far end of the couch, getting as far from Sakuta as possible.

"I'm not gonna jump you."

"I'm not taking your word for it."

"Hmm, well, I think most men would prefer it to the alternative."

Not being acknowledged despite sitting close together would be way worse.

"That's seriously not what I meant. Drop dead."

Nodoka was speaking in level tones, her face and eyes looking straight ahead at the TV. It was playing one of Mai's movies. From before her hiatus...when she was still in junior high.

Whenever Mai was on-screen, Nodoka's eyes were glued to her.

She paid special attention to how Mai blinked, when she blinked, and how she shifted her gaze—trying to absorb every last detail.

Going through Mai's performances had become her post-dinner routine. Sometimes it was movies, sometimes TV shows.

Tonight they were watching a blockbuster horror movie. It was about people dying mysteriously after their names were posted on a particular social media site.

Mai played a sinister girl who always appeared after a body was found. She had incredible presence—sometimes she'd just be standing perfectly still, but it was impossible to miss her. Her lips would move ever so slightly, and it would send a shudder down your spine.

The biggest scare was when the third victim, a woman in her midtwenties, was taking a shower. Mai suddenly appeared in the mirror in front of her.

"?!"

Nodoka muffled a terrified shriek. Sakuta's heart almost leaped out of his chest, too.

It didn't seem like Nodoka was much of a horror fan. It took her less than five minutes to grab a cushion and hold it protectively in front of her. Ever since the first death, she'd had half her face buried behind it, peering over the top to keep watching.

Clearly, the only reason she managed to get through the whole thing was because she was clinging to the hope that she'd find the hint she needed somewhere in Mai's performance.

When the credits started rolling, **Mai Sakurajima** appeared at the very top of the cast list. A moment after it vanished, Nodoka clutched her head.

"Augh, I'm so doomed."

"Why?"

"The reshoot is tomorrow!"

"I know."

"And I'm still clueless."

Sakuta sighed dramatically.

"I should be the one sighing!"

"Don't tell me you're serious."

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"It's already been decided. Why are you still fretting about it?"

She'd said it herself. She hadn't found a clue and had zero confidence, but the shoot was tomorrow...that was pretty much set in stone.

"You're not gonna become 'Mai Sakurajima' in a single week."

"That's..."

That was something Nodoka knew even better than he did. There was no natural way to match ten years of professional acting

overnight. No matter how intently anyone studied her performances, all they'd do is prove how amazing Mai really was.

If it was possible to achieve the same results from just watching, all actors would be like Mai. There would be Mai Sakurajimas everywhere.

"And tomorrow won't change a thing. It'll just be another day."

"D-don't remind me!"

"They'll call action, and you'll still be you."

"I said you don't have to remind me... You really know how to get on people's nerves, you know that?"

"Whatever you say. Besides, I've never even seen your nerves."

"I obviously didn't mean that literally!"

Nodoka jumped to her feet, huffing and puffing. This was definitely something Sakuta would never see once the sisters were back in their own bodies.

"Anyway, my point is, you don't need to try so hard to be something you aren't."

The more she tried to be Mai Sakurajima, the more she was headed for a repeat of last time. Like the week before, she'd hyperventilate, and the shoot would be postponed.

"It's perfectly fine even if you're just 'good enough.' You're being real greedy."

Nodoka gave him a long, searching look.

"Why'd you suddenly go quiet?"

"I think I figured something out."

"Huh?"

"About you."

"Is this really the time for that?"

"You've been talking nonsense, but you're trying to cheer me up."

Nodoka grinned, like she'd won the battle.

"Well, it's Mai's job, so I want it to go well."

"Oh? I'll leave it at that for your sake."

"Uh, I mean it, though?"

"Then I'll be mad."

"Be as mad as you like."

Sakuta got to his feet.

"What, you're leaving?"

"Yep. If I'm late getting back, Mai'll get grumpy."

Since she'd given him her spare key, she was clearly okay with him looking after Nodoka. But if he was here too long, she'd get *very* prickly. Last night she'd gone so far as to specify that he should be home by eight, like a Showa-era curfew.

"I'm just watching your movies and shows with her!" he'd protested.

"It's not that I don't trust *you*," Mai had said, not looking at him.

"Then what?"

"If Nodoka starts wanting you, *that's* a problem."

This had caught him off guard.

"Like...sexually?"

"....."

Her glare had chilled him to the bone.

"Sorry, not funny," he'd said hastily.

"I don't mind giving her some things, but at the moment, I'm not interested in giving her you."

Mai had clearly been fighting back her own embarrassment and didn't see any of this as a laughing matter. Sakuta had miserably failed to stop himself from grinning, which made it worse, but he felt this much was forgivable. Mai was being really cute, after all. He wanted to record this moment and play it back every night.

"Well, at the moment, she mostly seems to despise me."

He was making her dinner every night, but rather than show any gratitude, Nodoka mostly was all, "Stop leering at my sister's body!" or "Don't sit so close!"

"Even if she did feel anything like that, it would only be because she's jealous of what you have."

"One hopes."

Mai had let it drop, but she didn't sound convinced.

That exchange had been last night, so he figured he'd better get home early. If he stayed here too long, there was no telling what she'd say this time. The punishment could be severe.

"Take a nice long bath and go to bed early," he said on his way to the door.

The shoot was at the crack of dawn. Her manager would be here to pick her up at four thirty AM.

"I know that. You don't have to tell me."

"Bye."

"Oh, wait."

She stopped him before he reached the door.

"Message for Mai? Tell her yourself."

"Not that."

Seemed like it really wasn't.

"Then what?"

"So, uh...I want to take a long bath, so can you stay until I'm out?"

She shot him an anxious look.

"Huh?"

He'd never expected that, so he just gaped at her.

"*You're* the one who said to take a bath and go to bed early."

“And what part of that involves me being here? Doesn’t make a whit of sense.”

“I-if I’m in the bath alone, sometimes it feels like there’s someone else here,” she mumbled.

“Oh, like when you’re in the shower and you can sense someone behind you?”

Like that scene in the movie. Nodoka made a face.

“So what you mean is that you’re scared, right?”

“I saw you jump, too!” Nodoka wailed, unable to disguise it any longer.

“I’ll stay if you let me in the bath with you.”

Nodoka seemed to be giving this serious thought.

“I-if my sister approves...,” she said gravely.

“Uh, no, I was kidding. Come on, don’t take stuff like that seriously.”

Nodoka did this sometimes. The way she would totally miss the joke was proof she was a serious soul.

“! Drop dead! Then die again!”

“You mean, like, die socially and then physically?” he wondered, not really addressing her.

“I’ll never show you her body!”

“I’d much rather see it with her inside.”

“This isn’t even what we’re supposed to be talking about!” Nodoka growled, realizing he’d led them off on a tangent.

“.....”

Sakuta yawned, and she scowled at him.

“Fine, I’ll wait till you get out. You’re so *needy*.”

“Leave the last part out,” she complained and snatched up her pajamas. Sakuta had folded them earlier and laid them out on the couch for her. She ran into the bedroom, likely to grab a change of underwear.

She came back out, went into the changing room, and stopped at the door, looking back.

“You shouldn’t peek,” she hissed.

Did she say it that way because she wanted him to? That’s what it sounded like to Sakuta.

But a moment later, the changing room door closed, and he heard the lock click.

“.....”

Now he *couldn’t* peek.

He sat back down on the couch instead. Then his eyes flicked to the sliding doors between the living room and the tatami room.

———“*No matter what, don’t open the cupboards in the tatami room.*”

He remembered what Mai had said when she handed him the key.

“.....”

Until now, he hadn't had a moment to check, but Nodoka was in the bath, so this could be his chance.

He got up and slid the door open.

Mai didn't seem to use this room much. There was basically nothing in here. The tatami themselves still smelled new, and she was definitely keeping it clean.

At the very back was something you could call a cupboard. The only furniture in the room.

He opened the top drawer. There was only one object inside.

A cookie tin.

The picture on top showed dove-shaped shortbread cookies. It was a big tin that was apparently supposed to contain thirty-six cookies.

Sakuta took it out and placed it on the tatami.

Then he carefully opened the lid.

“.....”

It was full of letters. All of them addressed to Mai Sakurajima, in the same handwriting. The oldest ones had her name in hiragana instead of kanji.

There was no need to look at the return address.

He put the letters back in the tin and gingerly placed it back in the cupboard. He closed the drawer again.

Then he left the tatami room, sliding the door closed behind him.

“Aaaargh,” he said, feeling the need to put this mood into words.

Mai's feelings were locked away in that cupboard. And it was obvious how Nodoka really felt, too.

“Man, I hope they make up soon...”

Sakuta was well and truly ready for these sisters to stop being so hardheaded.

2

In the end, even on the day of the shoot, Nodoka was far from ready. When she stepped onto the set, she looked distraught and was super-stiff during the run-through.

A week wasn't enough time for anyone to change that much. She was still the same person.

But she'd tried one thing after another, and her struggles hadn't been entirely in vain.

Nodoka had figured out some things. Had made some discoveries. Sakuta had been there with her, and he'd done both those things as well.

This was how real life worked.

There was no way to be completely prepared for anything, film shoot or otherwise. Even with weeks to prep, it was entirely possible to still feel anxious. Whether those worries remained or not, all that remained was to face reality head-on. There was no choice but to overcome it somehow.

For Sakuta, this past week had been about learning that. The moment this lesson crystallized for him came more than an hour into shooting, when the director's voice echoed through the station.

"Yeah, okay! That's a wrap!"

The crew immediately started clearing out. It was seven thirty, and more and more people were coming through the station. Old ladies out walking their dogs were stopping to watch the shoot.

Nodoka went around to each crew member, saying a word or two. The cameraman gave her a big grin, and the assistant next to him seemed surprised to be included in her thanks.

Sakuta was an outsider here and obviously couldn't join in. So he quietly moved away. Some crew members had remembered him from the week before and regarded him with suspicious looks.

They must have thought he was some creepy fan following Mai Sakurajima around—those were definitely looks reserved for a suspected stalker.

He waited for the light by the crossing to change and headed toward the beach. It was too late to swing back home but too early to head to school. The best option was to merely hang around, watching the waves roll in.

The beach was almost empty at this hour. He could see a few people far in the distance but no one within earshot. He had the beach to himself.

All he could hear were the sounds of nature. The crisp fall breeze, the churn of the surf.

A few days ago, it had still felt like summer, but the wind carried a new chill that made it clear autumn had arrived.

It was mid-September. Summer *should* have been on its way out the door.

The water sparkling in the morning light was no longer as striking a shade of blue. The colors deepened as fall rolled in.

It was refreshing, peaceful.

Nothing blocked his view. Just the sea, the sky, and the horizon.

Monopolizing all of that, Sakuta yawned with an "Hwaaah."

Waking up at five was brutal. He was so sleepy. Even with the light this bright he could barely keep his eyes open.

"You're ruining a great view."

The voice came from right next to him.

He glanced in that direction and saw Nodoka standing on the beach. Still looking like Mai. Enoshima floated on the water behind her, making it seem like a shot from a movie.

He'd been so out of it he hadn't noticed her approach.

"They offered to give me a lift to school, but it's too early for that," she explained. He hadn't asked. She'd switched from the outfit she wore for the commercial into her Minegahara uniform—the summer uniform, complete with black tights. Just like Mai always wore them.

Nodoka moved closer, eyes on the water. She stopped about three steps from him, turning to face the ocean.

"Ahhh, this feels great!" she said, stretching.

"Good work on the shoot."

"Thanks."

"Glad it ended well."

"Except it only took twelve takes. Horrible."

"Better than collapsing on the first one."

"I wish I could forget. Quit reminding me!"

They fell silent.

For a while they just listened to the surf and the wind.

"I can't be like my sister," Nodoka said abruptly. Talking to the water.

"You got there in the end, though."

"Not what I meant."

"Huh?"

"I meant after I'm back in my body."

"Aha."

"Even if Nodoka Toyohama and Sweet Bullet get wildly popular, and I become as famous as she is...I could never live under that kind of pressure. Never."

"Worry about that once you get popular."

"....."

He felt her glare on his cheek. He glanced toward her; she was definitely frowning at him. No, scowling.

"You don't think I'll manage?"

"Mm."

"Don't just grunt at me!"

"I mean, there's a *lot* of idols."

Mai had been watching a bunch of different idol concert videos, so he was getting a pretty good idea just how many there were.

From what Mai told him, even just counting the ones at major agencies, there were over two thousand active idols. If local or underground idols were included, there was no telling how many were

around. It was insanely competitive.

Only a few of these managed to get on TV regularly. And behind those glamorous stages were countless other idol groups, dreaming of their moment in the spotlight.

“There are a lot. That’s true.”

“Lots of girls cuter than you.”

“I—I know that, too, but...!”

She clearly didn’t want it spelled out. She’d gotten all sulky again.

Sakuta kept going anyway.

“And you’ve gotta sing *and* dance...”

“You’ve never even seen my concerts!”

“I have. Just like you’re watching Mai’s movies and shows, Mai’s been watching concert videos, promo videos, music videos... She gets pretty into it.”

“So you’ve seen all that and still have the nerve to talk to me this way?”

“Saying it behind your back would just be *rude*.”

“It’s tactless either way!”

“If having tact means knowing exactly how hard it’ll be but saying, ‘You’ll make it big soon!’ or ‘I know you can do it if you work hard enough!’ then I got all that crap out of my system and flushed it down the toilet years ago. Flushed that baby twice for good measure.”

Nodoka gave him a look of frozen horror.

“I know my beautiful metaphor has impressed you, but don’t make Mai look so dumb.”

“This is a look of disgust! Who *are* you?!”

“Sakuta Azusagawa.”

“Ugh, you are literally the worst,” Nodoka snapped. She turned on her heel and started walking along the beach, deliberately staying on the wet portion of the sand. It was firmer than the dry part and easier to walk on.

She was headed east. Toward Kamakura and their school. A one-stop walk would take her right below Shichirigahama Station.

He got up and followed, matching her pace.

“Argh, I dunno what to do.”

“You’ve gotta accept the face and body you were born with.”

“Not what I’m talking about!”

“Then what? Your mom wants you to be as popular as Mai Sakurajima, but you know that’ll never happen, so you’re stuck?”

He threw the question at her like it was no big deal.

“.....”

Nodoka stopped in her tracks. Sakuta stopped with her, a good ten feet back.

“Yeah, that’s right. Is that a problem?” Nodoka asked, not turning

around.

“Ain’t up to me to decide if it is.”

“.....”

“What about you?”

“What about what?”

“Do you wanna be like Mai?”

Nodoka stood perfectly still, not looking at him. She kept her head slightly down, thinking. Two, three waves rolled in.

“I dunno,” she said, her voice oddly clear for such an unclear statement. “I think I did once. The truth hadn’t dawned on me yet, and...I really did look up to her.”

She actually did look up as she said this, turning her gaze to the sky.

“And now?”

“That’s what I dunno,” she said as she turned toward him, radiating scorn. “I only just figured it out that I could never do that. If I was under that much pressure all the time, the stress would kill me. I guess I’m leaning toward not wanting to be like my sister after all.”

This felt like an honest answer. An admission of how much the whole experience had spooked her.

“So you can’t do it Mai’s way, but you’ve still gotta find a way to please your mom.”

“Wow, easy for you to say. Could that goal be any more ambiguous?”

“It’s *because* it was easy to say that I said it. Come on, try to keep up.”

Nodoka glared at him.

“If there’s no point, you can always just quit, right?”

“Huh?”

“The whole idol thing. The fans’ll notice if you’re not into it anyway.”

Sakuta started walking as he spoke, passing Nodoka.

“While you’re at it, give Mai back her body and go home already. I can’t believe that I got a chance to start living with her, but all she does is practice singing and dancing! She’s got no time for me, and I’m all *frustrated*.”

If he tried to strike up a conversation with her, she’d just cut him short. “Sorry, after dance practice.” And if he waited patiently till that was done, all he would get is “I’m going to bed. Can it wait till morning?” And if he waited till morning, she’d already have left the house to go jogging. And when she got back from that, she’d hop straight in the shower and then go off to Nodoka’s school.

Even on weekends, she was usually in Nagoya, Osaka, or Fukushima, at event halls or shopping malls, doing mini concerts.

If he didn't know better, it was like they were a couple about to break up from constant lack of contact. And Mai didn't even seem to be aware of the problem, which made it that much worse. Sakuta felt like he was the only one getting antsy.

"In that case, want me to take special care of you instead?"

"Huh?"

He spun around and found Nodoka grinning at him. That was clearly the smile of somebody who was up to no good. There was little doubt in Sakuta's mind that she was planning to use Mai's body to tease him mercilessly. But her schemes were far too transparent.

Then again, he didn't see a reason to reject the idea. He decided to ignore the fact that it was Nodoka inside and play along. Given the enforced celibacy, Mai would probably allow him a *little* fun.

"Specifically?"

"Anything *she'd* let you do."

Nodoka came closer, looking confident. Still believing that lie he'd told her about them just holding hands. Maybe it was time to tell her the truth.

"Well, we haven't Frenched yet."

"French what?"

"Smooches."

"Huh?" It took her a moment to catch up. "Er, wait, what? Wouldn't that mean you've done non-French...?"

"Yep."

"?!"

Nodoka was so shocked her foot caught on a mound of sand. She lost her balance completely and toppled toward him.

"Augh! Look out!"

He reached out to catch her, but she was falling too fast, and he ended up getting dragged down under her.

Something soft brushed against his right cheek. He knew that sensation. Mai had done the same thing to him before.

Judging from Nodoka's reaction, his guess was right on the money.

She scrambled up hastily, hiding her lips with both hands and already red. When her eyes met Sakuta's, her blush deepened, and she hastily turned her back on him. She tried to cover this by brushing the sand off her skirt. Too late.

"Mai, could you gimme a hand here?"

Sakuta held his hands up, waiting for her to pull him to his feet.

"....."



Nodoka visibly hesitated, but seemingly not wanting him to think she was embarrassed, she approached him without a word. Her lips were pressed tight, and she was clearly forcing down her emotions, but she helped him up.

“Honestly, I didn’t think you’d go that far.”

“I—I didn’t—Well, that much is no big deal,” she said, turning away from him again. “W-we’re in high school. K-kissing is totally normal.”

“Are idols allowed to say that?”

“I’ve never done it before!” she yelped, so flustered she wasn’t making sense. Then she realized she’d dug her own grave. “Except I have!” she hastily added. This really didn’t help.

“Yeah, but aren’t idols are supposed to be all pure and stuff?”

“It’s cool if you kiss other group members!”

He had not expected this light jab to result in her coming out.

“.....”

Vivid images of girls kissing floated into his head, and he instantly felt corruption calling.

“I had no idea. I suppose you *are* in love with your sister...”

“That’s not what I meant! I prefer guys!”

He was starting to feel like they should get off this subject. Nodoka was so rattled now, there was no telling what alarming facts she might blurt out next. He was saying stuff she should absolutely be refuting, but that seemed to be going right over her head. Apparently, she *did* love her sister.

“Well, *I* feel much better. Guess it’s time for school.”

It was still a bit early, but if he was late because he was busy bickering with Nodoka...he’d be pretty upset. What was the point of waking up at five?

“W-wait!” she said as he started walking.

“Really, you don’t need to come up with any more excuses.”

“That’s not it...”

He turned around and found a new look on her face. She was done squirming.

“I can’t be like my sister. But I *am* gonna be an idol.”

The clouds were gone. The smile on her face was a sunbeam.

“I only started it because Mom applied for me, and I happened to pass. But the concerts are fun, and I have fans cheering me on.”

“Okay.”

“Yeah, so first I’ve gotta buckle down, get a song where I’m the center. Maybe then my mom’ll start to get it.”

“Huh.”

“Hey,” she said, her tone dropping suddenly. She didn’t look

happy.

“What?”

“Why do you look so bored?”

“Because I *am* bored?”

“Excuse me? This a serious conversation!”

“Serious conversations are typically boring.”

“For real, what is going on in your head?”

“It’s basically full of Mai.”

“.....”

“.....”

“Fine. I’m gonna get super-famous and make you eat your words.”

“On the off chance that day comes, I promise I’ll look suitably surprised.”

“You better not forget.”

“Then get famous before I do.”

As they spoke, Sakuta started walking toward school again. Nodoka followed, keeping pace with him. She spent a while grumbling about him, and he let her.

They went up the stairs and followed the road that led to the school.

While they waited for a signal, Nodoka suddenly started digging around in the pocket of her bag. She pulled out her phone and twitched the moment she saw the screen.

“You answer,” she said, thrusting it toward Sakuta. He glanced at the screen. There was an incoming call from “Nodoka.” In other words, this was Mai calling.

Sakuta considered telling Nodoka to answer it herself, but he figured it would go to voice mail while they argued, so he just took the phone from her and tapped the screen.

“Hello?”

“Why are *you* answering?”

“She doesn’t wanna talk to you.”

“I didn’t say that!” Nodoka yelled, yanking the short sleeves of his uniform.

“Well, I was calling for you anyway,” Mai said.

“You were?”

“Mm, I was about to leave when your phone rang. Didn’t know the number, so I didn’t answer. It went to the answering machine...”

When someone left a message, anyone in the room would be able to hear their voice even without picking up the receiver, which meant...

“Who was it?”

“Your dad.”

She sounded slightly tense. She knew why he wasn’t living with

his parents, so she was concerned.

“And Kaede?”

“Poked her head out to listen. She said she was fine, but...she seemed a little surprised.”

“I see.”

He'd have to make one of Kaede's favorites for dinner.

“It's so *you* to worry about Kaede first,” Mai said, almost to herself.

“What was the message?”

“He wants to meet Sunday.”

“Got it. Thanks for letting me know.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Oh, and the commercial shoot wrapped up okay. After, like, thirteen takes.”

“Twelve!” Nodoka corrected. Loud enough that Mai probably heard her.

“Okay. Tell Nodoka she did good.”

Sakuta had very obviously changed the subject, but Mai let that pass without comment. She probably had questions and was definitely worried, but she didn't let it show when she humored him. She knew that if she did, it would force him to answer.

He deeply appreciated her delicacy where his parents were involved. It wasn't like they were fighting and he wasn't reluctant to meet them or talk to them. But they didn't live together. That left things up in the air, and he wasn't sure he could communicate his feelings on the matter in a way that made any sense.

“I'd better get to school,” Mai said.

“Okay. Bye.”

He hung up and handed the phone back to Nodoka. She clearly had questions. Even if it was Mai inside, she probably would've had the same expression on her face. Nodoka had never looked more like Mai.

3

On the way home from school that day, they found themselves locked in a battle of endurance.

All because of that phone call. All because Mai had let him know his father had been in touch.

Nodoka clearly wanted to ask.

Sakuta pretended not to notice.

Waiting for the train on the tiny platform in Shichirigahama

Station, riding the short four-car train, and after they disembarked at Fujisawa Station—neither of them said a word the entire time.

He was pretty sure Nodoka *meant* to be considerate. She was trying not to show how much she wanted to pry. But the act was so transparent it was impossible to miss what she really wanted to do. Sakuta had long been of the opinion that Nodoka was a terrible liar. Her expression and body language were a dead giveaway.

While Sakuta stopped at a convenience store for the *slightly* better pudding, and after they left, any time they made eye contact, she immediately looked away.

It took a tremendous amount of acting to pretend he hadn't noticed.

"You wanna know more about my family, right?" he asked, a few blocks later. He'd gotten sick of the weird tension and decided to just tackle it head-on. A high school kid and his junior high-aged sister living alone together was hardly ordinary, after all. Anyone would have questions.

"....."

Nodoka looked at him, surprised. But she recovered quickly.

"My sister told me the basic gist," she said quietly. "The day we swapped bodies."

She sounded uncomfortable. Probably guilty about airing someone else's dirty laundry.

Mai must have deemed it necessary information, and Sakuta didn't have a problem with that. Nodoka had nothing to feel guilty about.

"Then what?"

"How do you feel about your parents?"

They stopped at a red light.

"I think they're my parents."

"Huh?"

"They're my parents."

"Is that it? There's gotta be more."

"Like?"

"Love 'em, hate 'em, can't stand 'em, wish they'd get off your back, etcetera."

"Probably all of those," he said.

"....."

Nodoka did not appear to be satisfied. She didn't think he meant it.

"I've thought each of those things at some point. I think."

"You think?"

"What do you want me to say?"

The light turned green. Sakuta left Nodoka standing there, lost in

thought. A moment later, she hurried after him.

When she caught up, she looked even more disgruntled. Her lips were twisted to one side. But it didn't seem like she was bothered by his answer. More frustrated by her inability to control the flow of conversation.

"You don't resent them?" she tried when they'd cleared the crossing.

"Not really."

This part was definitely true.

They were living apart as a direct result of Kaede getting bullied. He'd certainly been angry at a lot of things right after that happened. Part of that had certainly included resentment for his parents. But looking back on it now, it was clearly a fleeting phase. As time passed, his emotions settled down. And a big part of that was the person who'd helped him through it—Shouko Makinohara.

"Why not?"

"Probably because they're my parents."

The answer came easily again. This was one of those things where the more thought went into it, the more complicated the answer became, but barring any overthinking, the answer could actually be surprisingly simple.

Nodoka fell silent again, mulling it over. Probably about her relationship with her mother.

She'd run away from home after a fight, so her mother was definitely a source of resentment. She didn't want to see her, speak to her, or have anything to do with her.

But she also knew deep down she couldn't leave things like this. Or rather, she didn't *want* to.

So she was searching for a solution in Sakuta's words. But no matter how carefully she picked them over, she couldn't find the answer she wanted. All she found was Sakuta's.

"Your parents ever say, 'They do things their way, we do things our way'?"

"Our way was more 'Do it like Mai does,'" Nodoka muttered, like she was reciting a curse.

"That sounds terrible."

"It was."

They fell silent. Nodoka didn't have more questions. She didn't have anything else to add, either. But the silence didn't last that long.

When they reached their apartment buildings...

"That car...", Nodoka said, frowning.

...there was a white minivan parked outside. Shinagawa plates. Definitely didn't belong to anyone who lived nearby.

As he looked it over, the driver's-side door opened. A classy lady

around forty got out. She immediately homed in on Nodoka. It was like Sakuta wasn't even there. She strode toward them, heels clicking.

Nodoka's lips moved. "Mom," she mouthed.

"Mai," Nodoka's mother said crisply. Reproachfully. Clearly blaming Mai. "Where's Nodoka?"

The accusation in her tone was obvious. There was no way she could know "Mai" was actually Nodoka. Nobody would ever guess they'd swapped bodies, and even if they told her, she'd never believe it. Nodoka's mother thought she was talking to Mai.

"It's high time you gave her back."

She was definitely treating Mai like a villain here.

"This is a critical time for her. I won't let you interfere."

"Sorry, I'm confused," Nodoka said in Mai's voice.

But her lips were shaking.

"She's staying with you, right?"

"She isn't."

"Don't lie to me!"

She wasn't lying. Mai—in Nodoka's body—was staying in Sakuta's apartment.

"She really isn't with me. If you'd like, feel free to come in and check."

That shut her mom up. If she did barge in, she'd be forced to admit how inappropriate this was. And she was at least rational enough to realize that.

"No, that won't be necessary," she said, backing down. "If you hear from her, tell her to come home."

"I'll do that," Nodoka said, gamely maintaining her Mai act.

This display of maturity left her mother wanting to say something, but she thought better of it and strode back to her vehicle. The engine started, and it drove away not long after. It was soon out of sight.

"Isn't she awful?" Nodoka asked.

She looked sad. Nobody *wanted* to gripe about their parents.

"I don't think it's wrong to get desperate where your kids are concerned."

"*She's* only trying to protect her own pride."

That was certainly part of it. Like Mai had said, Mai and Nodoka were trapped in a proxy war between their mothers to see who would be more successful. Mai's mother had seized an overwhelming victory and was likely past caring, but to Nodoka's mother, the battle was ongoing. Her attitude had made that clear.

At the same time, the way she'd shown up, damn the consequences? That definitely struck Sakuta as a mother's protectiveness.

When people act for themselves, their rational minds usually kick

in, making them prone to hesitating, worry about appearances, and more interested in avoiding risk. But when acting for someone else's benefit, they could justify all sorts of things to themselves by saying there was no other choice. It was a great excuse for desperate acts.

At the very least, Sakuta would never embarrass himself for his own benefit. He'd only been able to tell Mai he loved her in front of the whole school because he had a good reason that compelled him.

"....."

Nodoka was still staring after her mother's long-departed minivan. The sad look on her face suggested she'd found the answer she'd been looking for in their earlier conversation.

"I don't see the problem."

"....."

She shot him a confused look.

"In loving your mom."

"?!"

"You fight, get mad, run away, but you still love her."

"....."

Nodoka didn't say anything. She gritted her teeth, staring at Sakuta. Glaring at him. Like she was trying to gauge if he meant what he said. She forgot to blink.

"...Even an awful mom like that?" she asked, without much confidence.

This was the truest expression of her feelings yet, Sakuta thought. Constant meddling so she'd be "like Mai," all the frustration and fights...it had gotten bad enough that she'd run away.

She had plenty to hold against her mother after all she'd said and done. But Nodoka still couldn't bring herself to hate her. She knew full well it didn't make sense, but the part of her that wanted to go on loving her mother was just as strong.

These conflicting emotions were still warring within her. And that's why she was looking to Sakuta for a solution.

———"You don't resent them?"

It was all contained in that brief question.

"Who said she was awful?"

Sakuta definitely hadn't.

"I think she's awful. She shows up at every concert so the whole group knows about her. I know. They've said things like 'Doka, your mom's something else.'"

"Is that why you feel like it's wrong to love her?"

"....."

"That's a dumb reason."

"I mean...!"

"If you got upset because someone talked shit about your mom,

that's your answer right there. If you feel sick because you had a fight, again, then that's your answer."

"....."

Nodoka's hand gripped her shirtfront tight. She must have been agonizing for a while.

"How..."

"Mm?"

"How do you know exactly what I wanted to hear?"

She glared up at Sakuta, fighting back tears. But she failed to hold them in for long. The emotions welled up, half-happy, half-ashamed, a mix that made her look very young. Like a little kid insisting they aren't crying.

"Girl, don't do that with Mai's face! It's far too adorable. I can't contain myself!"

"Well, just don't!"

She wiped the tears from the corners of her eyes.

"Holy crap, girl. Please, stop."

That gesture had been equally devastating.

"How about you quit that?"

"Huh?"

"Quit calling me 'girl'! It's insulting! Dumbass."

This appeared to be an attempt at disguising her tears.

"I'll quit if you quit," he said.

"Huh?"

"I mean, I don't actually care if you call me dumbass or not."

"Ugh."

"But you shouldn't be swearing with her lips."

"*That* you clearly mean. You really do dote on her."

"Yep."

"....."

"What?"

"Sakuta, have you no concept of shame?"

Apparently they were on a first-name basis now.

"Azusagawa's too damn long."

He hadn't asked, but she was already making excuses. She turned away, her cheeks burning.

"Call me whatever you like, Toyohama."

"....."

"Your first and last name are almost the same length."

"I didn't say a word!"

"Or would you rather I call you Doka?"

Her nickname in the idol group.

"Don't be stupid."

"No go? Then I'll just call you that in my mind."

“Dumbass.”

“We’re switching back to that, Doka?”

“It’s all you deserve!” Nodoka yelled. Fuming, she stomped off into her building.

“One step forward, one step back,” Sakuta said.

He turned on his heel and headed into his own place.

“I’m hooome.” Sakuta called as he opened the door.

“W-welcome back!” Kaede called, like she normally did. But unlike normal days, she didn’t come running to the door. Usually, she and Nasuno were in a race to get there first...

Instead, she was peeping around the edge of the washroom door, watching him from behind cover.

“Y-you’re back early.”

She sounded tense. A little flustered, even.

“Am I? Is this some new game?”

He took his shoes off and stepped inside. It was his house. He didn’t need permission.

“M-my life isn’t all fun and games!” Kaede said, like she was offended.

“I brought some pudding,” he said as he held up a convenience store bag.

“Hooray!”

Kaede beamed at him, almost lured out of the washroom.

But she quickly gasped and holed up again.

He decided to leave her to it and put the pudding in the fridge. When he came back, she was still being super-defensive.

“I’d kinda like to gargle?” he said.

“Washing hands and gargling are both important!” Kaede said enthusiastically.

“.....”

“.....”

But she didn’t open the door. Her defenses were as impenetrable as Odawara Castle. Well, not really. Sakuta could probably force his way in if he really wanted.

“Did you just get out of the shower? You’re not dressed yet?”

“I wouldn’t close the door for *that*!”

“I really think you should.”

Even between siblings, a baseline level of modesty should be maintained.

“So seriously, what is it?”

It was far too baffling to ignore.

This wasn’t like her at all. Were other teenage girls also suddenly locking themselves in the bathroom one day? Was this some symptom

of “that time of the month” that he was previously unaware of?

“I had a lot of things on my mind!” she said.

“And what thing in particular brought this on?”

He was getting tired of talking to just her face.

“You promise you won’t laugh?”

“I would prefer to be laughing *all* the time.”

“.....”

“Okay, I won’t laugh.”

He really had no idea what was going on.

“One minute.”

Kaede’s head disappeared, and the door slammed shut.

“.....”

He could hear her moving around inside. Getting herself ready.

The door stayed firmly closed.

After a good three minutes, just as he was considering opening the door himself, she finally emerged.

Kaede was fully dressed.

But not in her usual outfit. She was wearing a white blouse with a navy-blue vest and skirt. He didn’t know why he found the outfit weird at first, but after a minute he realized it was a junior high school uniform. The summer outfit from the school she’d enrolled in after they moved here but had yet to attend.

It was clearly very new. She’d obviously never put it on. She had her skirt at regulation length, so it looked strangely long.

“W-well?”

“Smells like the closet.”

It had been stuck in there a long time.

“I-is that it?”

“The skirt’s a bit too long. Almost looks cheesy.”

“But cheese tastes good!”

“And very junior high.”

“I *am* in junior high!”

He left her fuming in the hall and went into the washroom. Rinsed his hands with soap and water before gargling. When Mai (in Nodoka’s body) had started staying here, she’d said, “If you catch a cold and give it to me, I’ll hold it against you forever.” Her expression was dead serious.

So just in case, he gargled again. And then washed his face for good measure.

“So I’ve been thinking,” Kaede said while his face was buried in the towel. “Maybe it’s time I tried again.”

“Don’t try too hard,” he said, giving her a pat on the head.

She giggled, like it tickled.

The call that morning must have brought this on. The one from

their father...

She knew she couldn't go on like this forever but needed one last push...and this morning had given her one.

That was how Sakuta saw it.

"You keep bringing over one girl after another, so I think it's high time that I get my act together."



That was a very different reason from what he'd imagined, but she seemed fired up about it.

"How did that lead to this?"

"What do you mean?"

She tilted her head, puzzled. Tilted it *really* far.

"Never mind."

It didn't matter what her reason was. What mattered was that she'd chosen to put her school uniform on. What mattered was that she'd done that of her own volition.

Before he could take pleasure from seeing her make such significant progress, Mai came in.

They'd gotten fed up with buzzing her in every time, and if Sakuta was at work, that wasn't even an option, so he'd ended up giving her a spare key.

"I'm back," Mai said.

"Welcome back, Nodoka!"

"Huh? Is that your uniform?" Mai asked, maintaining Nodoka's voice even when surprised. "It's very cute," she added.

"Sakuta said wearing it like this looks cheesy."

"You should definitely hike the skirt up a bit."

"I see!"

Kaede nodded, taking Mai's advice very seriously. "Nodoka" was fashionable, so coming from her, this was very convincing.

"Oh, and—I brought a present."

Mai handed her a convenience store bag.

Kaede peered inside.

"Oh, the slightly nicer pudding! Let's have a pudding party!"

"A what?" Mai asked, looking confused.

"My older brother also bought pudding!" Kaede said boastfully.

"He did?"

"Yep!" Kaede cheerfully scurried off to put the dessert in the fridge.

Mai finally looked at Sakuta.

"No singing practice?"

She always stopped at a karaoke box after school if she didn't have official lessons. He'd just assumed she'd do that today. But she was back awfully early for that.

"My throat doesn't feel up to it, so I'm letting it rest."

Clearly just a pretext.

She had obviously come back early because she was worried about Kaede. The slightly nicer pudding was proof of that.

"Don't you smirk at me."

She spoke like Nodoka but stomped on his foot like Mai. That only

made his expression even smugger. His cheeks hurt. But he couldn't stop himself. Grinning from ear to ear, he elected to savor the moment instead.

4

Two days later, Sunday rolled around. Sakuta ate lunch early and went to the restaurant for work. He had an hour break in the middle before another shift until nine.

During the lunch rush, taking care of customers on the floor kept him busy, but by two, things had died down and he was in the back, getting things ready for dinner. Those knives, forks, and spoons weren't going to polish themselves.

"Senpai."

"....."

He felt like someone was calling his name, but he paid it no attention as he continued plugging away at his work. His hands were making everything shiny.

"Senpai, help."

"....."

"Ignoring me?! So mean!"

He'd assumed he was imagining it, but apparently not. He turned toward the voice, his hand still moving.

Tomoe Koga was standing by the beer dispenser, cheeks puffed out. She looked like a chipmunk that had stuffed its mouth full of sunflower seeds.

"What, Koga?"

"I need help lifting the beer tank!"

Tomoe had a twenty-liter tank on a cart at her feet. The industrial silver kind. She had to hoist this onto a waist-high shelf, so it was a bit much for Tomoe alone and would be dangerous to try.

Getting it on the cart was likely the most she could manage.

"You could have just said. I would've fetched it."

"Huh?" She frowned at him. "You said, 'It's all yours.'"

"I did?" He had no memory of this. He thought about it.

Maybe he had said that. Shortly after he'd started polishing, someone said, "Senpai, the beer's empty," and he'd reflexively replied, "It's all yours." Had he been thinking hard about something? This was only ten minutes ago, but he barely remembered it.

"You really got it this far alone?"

"I thought my arms were gonna rip off getting it on the cart."

"Gruesome."

“You made me do it!”

“Yeah, well...sorry.”

“.....”

When he actually apologized, she leaned in, peering at his face. Like there must've been something wrong with him. It was kind of rude.

“I knew you were being weird today, senpai.”

“You ‘knew’?”

“You’ve been punching in wrong orders, taking dishes to the wrong tables, even dropping plates.”

“Are you stalking me?”

“You normally never make any mistakes, so it’s hard not to notice!”

She muttered “I’m not paying special attention to you or anything” under her breath, sulking again.

“Well, I guess I am an accomplished guy,” he said.

Tomoe ignored this completely. No reactions, opinions, gripes, or grumbles. He was very sad.

“You had a fight with Sakurajima, right?”

“Why do you look so happy?”

He grabbed Tomoe’s cheeks and pulled.

“Ow, ow!” She pulled away. “You’re stretching my face!”

“To be clear, this isn’t about Mai. I’m just meeting the old man on break.”

It had been too late to change his work shifts, so he’d scheduled the meeting during his hour break. Having a clear end to the meeting was, honestly, a plus.

“Really?! Mai’s dad?!”

“I said this wasn’t about her! I’m meeting *my* old man.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Once she got it, Tomoe became a bit evasive. She’d likely picked up on the vibe and figured out where his head was. She knew he and Kaede were living alone together. He’d explained the basics of the bullying incident and his mother’s exhaustion.

“Sorry, senpai,” she said, fidgeting.

“Why are you sorry?”

“I mean...”

“You were mad, like, a second ago.”

“Oh, right, the beer tank!”

“Got it.”

He moved over to the dispenser and grabbed one of the tank’s handles. Tomoe grabbed the other one.

“Ready?”

“Yep.”

“On-a-counta-three!!”

“Huh?”

“Augh!”

Tomoe tried to lift her side, but it was too heavy.

“You lift, too!” she said, scowling at him. “This isn’t the time for fake-outs.”

“You’re the one who chanted some weird magic spell.”

“What do you mean?”

“On-a-counta something?”

“On-a-counta-three,” she said as she gave him a “What about it?” look.

“What the hell is that?”

“Huh?”

Tomoe finally realized where the confusion came from.

This was probably some local variant on a standard “go on three” phrase.

“Uh, do they not say that in Tokyo?”

“Not in Kanagawa, they don’t.”

Probably not in Saitama, Chiba, Ibaraki, Tochigi, or Gunma, either.

“You’re kidding? I said it the other day when I was cleaning with Nana! I know I did!”

Tomoe clutched her head, wailing “Oh god” repeatedly. Tomoe was from Fukuoka, but she was keeping that a secret at school.

“You let things slip often enough Nana probably already knows.”

“That’s worse!”

“If she knows and respects your wishes enough not to say anything, she’s a good friend.”

“That just makes me sound sad! Ugh, how can I face her tomorrow?”

“Try using your usual cute face.”

“Argh, shut up.”

“C’m on, grab your end.”

“Oh, right.”

Sakuta grabbed his handle again. Tomoe grabbed hers, too.

“Here we go,” he said. “On-a-counta-three!”

“You’re so obnoxious!”

This time they lifted the tank successfully and connected it to the beer dispenser. The night’s revelry was secured.

“Talking to you sure does cheer me up, Koga.”

“That monotone isn’t remotely convincing! You’re horribad!”

Tomoe really had helped him feel a lot better.

Sakuta worked until his break without being distracted, and even

when his break arrived, he wasn't feeling antsy.

He punched out at exactly three thirty.

After quickly changing out of his uniform, he left the restaurant.

The agreed upon meeting spot was a café near the station.

When Sakuta stepped inside, he spotted his father waiting. His father raised a hand in greeting, then signaled a waitress.

Sakuta settled down across the table from him and ordered an iced coffee.

"No food?"

"I get fed at work."

"Okay."

The waitress took the menus away, and Sakuta took a sip of water, looking his father over. He was forty-five this year. Wore glasses that made him look like an engineer. It was a Sunday, but he was wearing the same white shirt and necktie he wore to work. Seemed like he had more gray hairs now.

"It's been a while."

"Yeah."

The iced coffee arrived. The waitress put a coaster down, then set the glass on it like she'd just served him some wine.

While she was there, neither of them said a word.

"Enjoy!" she said and left.

There was another long silence.

Sakuta took a sip of coffee through the straw. His father lifted his coffee cup to his lips.

"How's Mom?" Sakuta asked once his father put the cup down.

"Better."

"Oh. Good."

They had that conversation every time they met. His father never said specifically how she was better. Sakuta had decided not to ask. This had become an unspoken rule between them.

"How's Kaede?"

"When I got home the other day, she was trying her uniform on."

"....."

His father's eyes widened in surprise.

"Going out is still too much for her, but...I think she feels like she can't go on like this anymore."

"Ah."

"I've caught her staring at the calendar, too."

The end of September was coming up. They were already a month into the second term. He figured that was prying at Kaede's mind.

"Ah."

This was probably not pleasant to hear. But the gentle look in his father's eyes showed he was happy to hear anything about her.

They'd been living apart for two years already. Sakuta had been meeting his father regularly and had seen his mother a few times. But that wasn't true for Kaede. She hadn't met either of them.

"....."

"....."

Once the conversation died down, neither broached a new topic. To cover the silence, they each took a sip of coffee.

Staring at each other seemed pointless, so Sakuta's eyes absently drifted around the café.

Lots of grown-ups, looking very sedate. Definitely the sort of place Sakuta would never come to on his own. The average customer age was too high; they were mostly middle-aged. Sakuta was the only kid here.

The next-youngest people were the couple at the table beside theirs, who were maybe in their midtwenties. The girl had a short haircut, artfully disheveled in a very grown-up way. She had large headphones around her neck. Definitely more "elegant" than "cute." She was a real classy lady.

The guy opposite her...well, his hairdo and glasses were immaculate, like the word *serious* had taken human form and was walking around. Or rather, sitting down. Even his shirt was tucked in neatly.

They were talking about the dolphin show, so they must have come from the aquarium.

"What next?" the man asked, glancing at the clock. Suggesting they still had time.

"You know my little brother? He brought a girlfriend home the other day," the girl said as she pretended to look at the menu. Even from the next table, Sakuta could tell that was a roundabout invitation.

"Oh, huh. But..."

"....."

"It feels a little early."

"We've been dating since high school."

"Yeah. And I feel like there's something I should say to you before I meet your parents..."

He adjusted his glasses, uncomfortable.

"...You mean?"

"I didn't plan to do this here, but...will you marry me?"

The headphone girl instantly turned bright red and hid her face behind the menu. But she didn't keep him waiting.

"Yes," she said, real quiet.

It didn't take them long to get up, pay their bill, and leave. Unable to endure sitting opposite each other any longer. Proposals did tend to

be conversation enders.

Still, that was quite a thing to witness from the sidelines. It was certainly a first for Sakuta.

He glanced up at the clock; it was 3:50. It had only been fifteen minutes since he'd arrived.

"So, uh," Sakuta said hesitantly as he watched the flow of people around him.

"What?"

"What's being a parent like?"

"Sakuta," his dad said, giving him a grim look. "Have you done something to some poor girl?"

"Of course not! We haven't gone that far!"

His reply came out as a yelp. He tried to clear up the misunderstanding fast, but his volume accidentally shot up, and people turned to stare.

"So you have a girlfriend?"

Only then did he realize he'd dug his own grave. His phrasing had definitely suggested he was dating someone.

"...Uh, well," he stammered. He didn't want to have this conversation. He'd rather die.

"When you settle in, bring her over. Your mother will be delighted."

"Why?"

"When you were first born, she said she'd always dreamed of meeting her son's girlfriend."

"That's a horrible dream."

The sort of thing any son would want to avoid. Sakuta didn't think he'd be ready to match the man one table over any time soon.

And he felt bringing Mai over would cause a whole lot of extra problems. Would they even believe it? They'd probably assume it was some TV prank show. And even if they did, the shock might leave them bedridden.

Best to table that thought for another day.

"That's not what I'm trying to ask."

"I know. But that's something you work out for yourself when you become a parent."

"...So... 'someday'?"

The idea didn't seem real. At all. He'd gone his whole life without wondering if he might be a dad someday. The idea had never even occurred to him.

"I hate to admit it, but when you were born, we both panicked."

The look on his father's face suggested *panic* was a mild word.

"Every diaper change was a huge deal. Every part of it was a new experience."

“I feel like there are better examples than *that*.”

Sakuta was grinning despite himself.

But maybe that was how it worked. Even if having kids was planned, nobody was truly prepared for how much work it entailed.

Just because you’d grown up and were making enough money to live on didn’t mean trying totally new things would be easy.

Especially something like raising a kid. No matter how much you prepared, you’d still be anxious about it and panic about every new challenge, yet somehow getting through it all. Having no idea what the right solution was, growing as parents even as your kids grew up.

People simply didn’t change that easily.

Sakuta got all that from his dad’s short reply.

They talked a bit about school and Sakuta’s plans for the future. He admitted he was intending to take college exams, and his father insisted he didn’t need to worry about paying for tuition. “I’m more worried about my own study skills,” Sakuta quipped. They both laughed.

The clock hands marched steadily onward, and soon his break was almost over.

“Time we got going,” his father said, standing up first. Without waiting for an answer, he took the check to the register. They split up just outside.

Sakuta watched his father walk off toward the station.

“Thirty years before I catch up with him,” he murmured.

After meeting his dad, Sakuta returned to the restaurant, changed back into his server uniform, and threw himself into work until nine.

He’d been working since noon, which certainly took a lot out of him. Tomoe had been on the same schedule, and teasing her had given him a second wind, so when he finally left work, he felt light on his feet.

It was already dark out, but there were plenty of streetlights around Fujisawa Station. Still masses of people going in and out, making the most of the last few hours of their weekends.

Figuring he’d better get home, Sakuta started walking.

“Sakuta,” a voice called.

Mai was standing under a nearby streetlight. In Nodoka’s body. Jean shorts and a blouse that opened wide at the shoulders. He could see the straps of the tank top she wore under it. There was a thick belt slung diagonally around her hips, drawing attention to Nodoka Toyohama’s narrow waist.

“Just getting home, Mai?”

He’d heard she was filming for a Kanagawa TV station today. She’d left before he did.

"I reached the station about ten minutes ago. Figured you'd be getting out soon."

So she'd stopped to wait for him. For once, the reason was glaringly obvious. She might've been trying to act like everything was normal, but ever since she'd heard the answering machine message, she'd clearly been worried about his meeting with his father. That's why she'd shown up like this.

"Long shift?"

"Not as long as your shoot."

They headed out together, into the residential area. He tried to take her bag, but she said, "Nah, I'm Nodoka today." He kinda got that, kinda didn't.

"They have you sing and dance?"

"Actually, it was more a variety show thing."

"Oh?"

"We had to put costumes on and run an obstacle course."

"Really?"

"They yelled start, and we all started running. Partway through, we had to draw lots and change into whatever outfit came up. Then go across balance beams or vaults and the like, trying to get to the goal first."

Being an idol sounded *hard*.

"Was it fun?"

"We got pretty into it. The group leader came in first, though."

Mai seemed to mean it. She really had enjoyed herself.

"I've never been able to join in any sports festivals, so it was kinda novel."

She'd been too busy working to do anything like that as a kid. Even if her schedule had lined up, how much fun could it have been with no friends at school?

"What costume did you get?"

This was what he cared about most.

"A bunny girl."

"I bet your experience sped up that wardrobe change."

Apparently, that actually had helped her come in second.

"I wouldn't call it 'experience,' though."

She reached out and flicked his forehead. Like an older sister scolding him for a prank. But that impression soon faded, and she looked disgruntled.

"This doesn't feel right."

"Flicking my forehead?"

"In Nodoka's body, you seem taller. That's the one thing I can't get used to."

Too many years in her own body. It wasn't easy to adjust.

“Yeah, you’re kind of a giant.”

“.....”

Mai pursed her lips, clearly not a fan of that phrase.

“You are a tall, elegant beauty.”

“Don’t get carried away,” she said, flicking his forehead again. She seemed much happier.

“Augh, wish I could have been there! It’s been so long since I’ve seen you as a bunny girl.”

“It’ll broadcast in two weeks, so you’ll just have to wait.”

“Even though we have a costume at my place?”

“You know I can’t wear that with Nodoka’s body.”

“But you already did for the show, right? And they’ll be airing it on TV?”

“It was a much tamer version. They had a vest over it.”

Considering the idols in her group were, like, sixteen and seventeen, that was probably appropriate. Frankly, Nodoka’s body in a bunny-girl costume would be a bit risky. He imagined that the top threatened to slide off any time she moved.

“Get your mind out of the gutter.”

“But I was thinking about you.”



“You can say that all you want. Your eyes still went straight to Nodoka’s tits.”

“Sorry.”

She’d caught him red-handed, so he immediately apologized.

“I don’t mind putting it on, but only after I’m back in my body.”

“Really?”

“I owe you for this, and, well, it’s just clothing.”

“Oh, but if you owe me, I could ask for something else.”

“You’re not getting anything else,” Mai said, putting the kibosh on that idea.

“It’s a normal request, I promise.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Then I’ll hear it out, at least.”

She really didn’t trust him. He made a face at her.

“I just wanna go on a normal date with you,” he said.

She’d been busy to start with, and then her agency had forbidden them from dating, so they hadn’t done any of the things couples usually do.

Mai looked up at him, surprised.

Then she laughed. “You’re an idiot,” she said.

But her face was blushing a little. The smile she wore was a heady mix of happiness and amusement.

“Oh, right,” she said, as if this reminded her of something.

“Mm?”

She ignored his question as she rummaged around in her bag. She pulled out a white envelope.

“Here,” she said, handing it to him.

“Thanks?” He took it. He would take anything she gave him. “But what is it?”

He opened the seal. There were two tickets inside. Concert tickets—for Sweet Bullet’s solo performance. They were dated for the coming Sunday.

“The other one’s for Nodoka.”

“How about giving it to her yourself?”

“Also tell her I’ll send one to her mother, too, like always,” Mai said, completely ignoring him.

Neither Mai nor Nodoka paid any heed to his efforts to get them back together. They were strangely in sync on the weirdest points.

“You got all the choreography and songs down?” he asked, giving up.

“Wanna see?”

That was an unexpected suggestion.

“It’s kinda hard to judge it objectively on my own,” Mai admitted. She pointed at the park they were passing.

She found a light in the middle and put her bag down under it. Then she pulled a phone out of her pocket, tapping at the screen for a moment. It had headphones plugged in, but she yanked them out.

He could hear music playing. Not too loud. Mai was soon moving on the beat. When the intro ended, her voice echoed through the park. Using the lamppost as a spotlight, Mai did a little concert just for him.

She was through the chorus in no time.

When it was done, Sakuta said, “Hot damn.” Unable to stop himself.

The concert was a week away.



complex congratulations

1

“Wow...,” Sakuta murmured.

The moment he’d set foot inside the concert venue, he was swept up in the passion of the fans.

The seatless hall was packed to the brim, a full fifteen minutes before the start time. The venue only fit two hundred people, but the crowd clearly couldn’t wait for the show to begin.

They were in Shibuya, popular haunt for the younger crowd. Not a place Sakuta had much to do with. He’d also never had anything to do with idol concerts before.

Picking a safe place against the wall at the back, he turned to Nodoka. “So you *are* popular.”

She still looked like Mai, and since they didn’t want to risk anyone spotting a famous actress in the crowd, she had a hat pulled down over her eyes and a mask over her face.

“This is the biggest box we can fill,” Nodoka grumbled. It was like two classrooms side by side. Maybe the size of the school’s science lab. It did feel a bit cramped. But that meant the stage was close enough to reach out and touch.

Even from the very back, everyone watching could clearly make out all the idols’ faces.

“I wasn’t being sarcastic,” Sakuta said. He was talking about the expectation levels, not the raw numbers. Not that he thought those were anything to sniff at... A packed house seemed like a pretty big deal to him.

“Your mom is here somewhere?” he asked, looking around.

Nodoka had mentioned that she came every time.

“Probably right up front.”

“Seriously?”

He didn’t have the courage to force his way up there.

“My position is usually stage left, so...”

That implied Mai’d be standing to the right. Sakuta looked that way, but there were too many people to find her easily.

He saw a lot of other women. Or rather...girls. Some Sakuta’s age,

some clearly still in junior high.

“More girls than I thought.”

The audience was definitely overwhelmingly male. But there was a solid 20 percent female presence.

“Zukki brings ’em.”

“Who?”

“Uzuki Hirokawa. Our leader. She’s also a model. Female fans are mostly here for her.”

“Huh.”

“They all got blue T-shirts, right?”

Like Nodoka said, more than half the female fans were wearing matching blue T-shirts. And had blue towels around their necks.

“What are those?”

“You wear the color of your fave.”

Sakuta glanced downward. Not feeling depressed, just checking his own clothes.

He was wearing a yellow T-shirt. One with the Sweet Bullet logo on it. He’d been given a towel of the same color.

It was a pretty simplistic design and would look like a normal logo tee at a glance. But he would never normally wear a shirt this color, so he wasn’t a fan.

“You’ll stand out more if you don’t have one,” Nodoka had insisted. He’d donned it reluctantly.

But now that he looked around the room, he had to admit she was right. The colors might be different, but everyone was dressed the same.

Nodoka herself was wearing the same yellow T-shirt under a light hoodie.

“So yellow is your color?”

“Got a problem with that? You’re here for my sister, right?”

“Well, sure.”

“Try it once. You might actually like it.”

“Guess we’ll see.”

Shrugging it off, he looked back across the room. If the colors showed who their favorites were, that made it easy to track, but it was also a brutal sort of popularity poll. At a glance, blue was winning. Red—no, pink was probably next, and yellow and green seemed to be neck and neck below that. So Nodoka was only the third or fourth most popular idol here.

“My sister...”

“Mm?”

“How’s she doing?”

“You gonna ask that minutes before she goes on?”

They’d hit the five-minute warning.

Nodoka didn't say anything, but she was clearly displeased.

"She's got the songs and routines down," Sakuta said, not looking at her.

"Obviously. I wasn't worried."

"Then don't ask."

"Shut up."

"I'm a bit worried, though."

"Huh?"

But before he could answer, there was a shrill howl of microphone feedback. At almost the same time, the house lights went out. The only illumination left was a few dim lights at their feet—everything else was shrouded in darkness.

But a roar of anticipation went up from the crowd.

And a moment later, a calm voice came on the loudspeaker.

"We have a few favors to ask."

"Zukki!" the crowd cheered.

Seemed like a Sweet Bullet member was handling the announcement herself. "Shh, listen! This is important!" she said and then listed a few rules. Your basic "no videos or photos," "don't get so worked up it bothers people around you," "don't throw things at the stage"—the same things they say at every concert but all delivered like she was having a conversation with the fans.

She probably did this every show. The fans seemed all too ready for it.

"Now our final request."

The crowd held their breath.

There was a long moment of silence. Then...

"Let's have fun—together!"

This time it was the whole group speaking as one. The stage lights flicked on, and huge fireworks went off like cannons.

When Sakuta recovered from the sudden loud noise, all seven idols were standing on the stage. The grabby rhythm of the first number's intro started playing.

Lots of guitar and drums, definitely a real rocker. Most of Sweet Bullet songs leaned this way. Mai had watched their performance videos nearly every night, so Sakuta was pretty familiar with their discography at this point.

With a live band backing them, they started singing, definitely a girl-power piece, all about following your dreams. The uplifting lyrics really sold it as an idol song.

The second and third numbers were also mainstream up-tempo songs.

After the third number, all members lined up onstage, breathing

heavily.

“Hello, everyone! We’re Sweet Bullet!” they chorused.

The fans started yelling. “Zukki!” “Yanyan!” “Dokaaaa!”

The idols waved back.

“Should I do that, too?”

“No need,” Nodoka said. She hadn’t moved a muscle this whole time, but she was glaring at him now. Must have thought he was making fun of her. He was just trying to get in the spirit of things. Here he was, armed with Nodoka Toyohama’s yellow T-shirt and everything.

“Well, here we all are.”

The girl in the middle holding the mic was the tallest of the group members, and she’d been the lead singer on all the songs.

“That’s Zukki,” Nodoka whispered. Sweet Bullet’s leader, and a model. She definitely had the figure for it. “You think my sister’s cuter, right?”

“Don’t read my mind.”

Mai was even taller. And her figure was flawless.

“Zukki, you’re really working up a sweat!” said the short-haired girl next to her.

“Idols don’t sweat!” Uzuki said, clearly caught off guard. A dubious comeback. Perhaps she was embarrassed. She’d turned a bit red, and clearly not from the exertion.

“Everyone can see it!”

Uzuki Hirokawa was visibly dripping. Her bangs were plastered to her forehead. But this was true for everyone up there; none of them had stayed spotless. The show opener had been a real workout. A full-throttle performance.

“Zukki, I always hear you complain about sweat-drenched panties after a show.”

This blow came from a blond girl stage left—Nodoka Toyohama. Currently with Mai inside her.

Zukki’s panicked response was even more alarming.

“Idols don’t wear panties!” she yelled.

She had a model’s build and a grown-up air about her, but she was surprisingly easy to rattle.

“Well, I’m wearing them!” Mai said, nailing Nodoka’s tone.

The other members all chimed in, betraying their leader. “So am I!” “Same here!”

“R-right, next number!” Uzuki said, trying to escape.

“No, no, we need to clear up this Zukki-goes-commando thing first,” the short-haired girl said as she stifled a laugh.

“Okay, I’m wearing them! But idols *don’t* sweat!”

“Then what’s that?” She pointed at the bangs fused to Uzuki’s

forehead.

“This is, uh, some sort of secretion,” Uzuki replied with a straight face.

“We should probably stop picking on her before she says something that could end her idol career,” Mai said, stage-whispering into her mic.

This got a big laugh.

“Right, next song!” the short-haired girl said. Seemed like she was group’s second-in-command.

The group laughed as they got into position. Ready for the next number. They all put their backs to the audience, standing perfectly still.

The intro started playing. This was a pop number, very cutesy. Exactly what Sakuta usually associated with “idol song.” Very different from the rock-infused style of the first three numbers.

“Go!” someone yelled.

And all members spun around, smiling, and jumped.

The song’s lyrics were pretty unusual. Nothing about dreams or friendship. Or bittersweet, one-sided love.

It introduced each of the seven members in turn. “Who’s the elegant beauty who always puts her foot in her mouth?” The whole crowd yelled, “Zukki!” “Who wears flashy makeup but is super-serious?” “Dokaaa!”

As the fans shouted their names, they changed their glow sticks to each girl’s color.

Apparently, idol concerts weren’t simply for watching. They had interactive portions, too.

While the song went on, the members left the stage, one at a time. And when the fans called their name again, they came back on in new costumes. The music was designed to match this staging.

The idols and their fans were so in step it was kinda overwhelming. Sakuta was keenly aware this wasn’t an energy he’d ever encounter in regular life.

The last introduction finished just before the bridge, leaving them all in their new costumes. For the big finish, the lyrics were about the idol group Sweet Bullet.

“We’re shooting for the Kohaku! The Budokan!”

Japan’s most-watched music broadcast and the biggest concert venue. Lofty goals indeed.

The fans were singing, too. They were so carried away it was like the grand finale, but the concert was only just starting.

“You have some interesting numbers.”

“Basically, all idol groups have a theme song like this.”

Nodoka gave him a look like she was surprised he didn’t even

know that. But Sakuta didn't know jack shit about standard idol stuff.

Up onstage, the next number started. Each of the members had a baton. The choreography had them spinning these batons a lot, dancing in formation like a brass band's color guard.

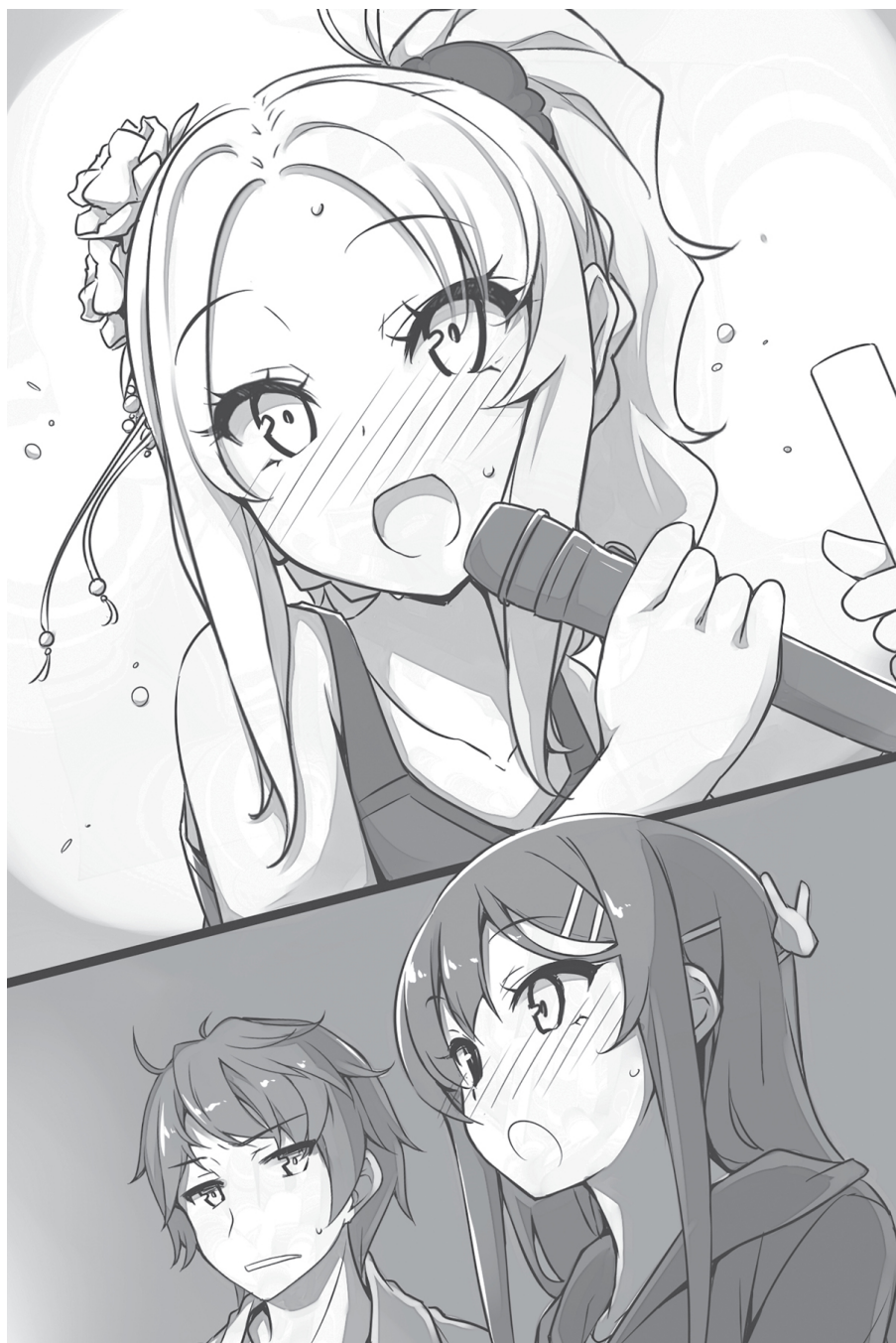
A totally different feel from the song before it. Kept things interesting.

As the second chorus began, the winds in the hall began to change. One by one, the fans eyes were drawn to the same girl.

The blond on the left side of the stage. Mai, onstage as "Nodoka Toyohama."

The other girls were all watching their batons carefully, but Mai barely looked at hers. She kept her eyes locked on the crowd, smiling at them.

Her movements were light, assured, practiced. Her steps knew when to change it up. She stopped right when she should and threw herself into it where the music demanded it. Her limbs moved with grace, but she kept a touch of that idol-like charm.



This was a formation dance, all seven of them doing the same moves. Mai wasn't doing anything to make herself stand out. Your eyes just naturally turned toward her. That was the kind of subtle appeal she gave off.

She was *different*.

It wasn't just Sakuta who thought so. He was sure the fans noticed, too. They couldn't take their eyes off her.

Just before the bridge, something happened that set it in stone.

The main vocalist, Uzuki Hirokawa, flubbed a baton toss.

Flustered by this, Uzuki pulled the mic away from her lips. But she was in the middle of a solo, so this should have caused a momentary drop in the vocals.

But Mai's voice rose up, like she was scooping up a dropped ball, keeping the song going.

The other girls looked surprised, but they were mid-song and kept their smiles up as they sang the rest. A stir ran through the crowd, and they got even more excited.

Uzuki recovered, and Mai shot her a glance, passing the vocals back to her. A nice recovery from what could have been much worse. The crowd was going wild.

Next to Sakuta, Nodoka was staring up at the stage, enraptured. Her lips were moving under the mask. He couldn't hear what she was saying with all the cheering. But he knew what she'd said.

"She's amazing..."

Nodoka might not even have been aware she'd said it. But her eyes told him it sprang from unadulterated admiration.

They performed dreamy ballads, big band numbers, technopop—all kinds of musical genres, the choreography perfectly matched. They kept the place hopping.

Two hours passed in a flash, and it was time for the grand finale.

Everyone onstage was soaked with sweat. They were all very out of breath. But they lined up, smiles as bright as ever, taking the hands of the members on either side.

"Thank you, everyone!"

They bowed to their fans.

When they raised their heads again, they looked really happy. Thoroughly satisfied. The kind of smiles that cheered you up just looking at them.

"Well?" Nodoka asked.

"I can see why some people get so into idols."

He absolutely meant it. He'd had no idea a concert was this much work. It was like they'd thrown everything they had into it and pulled through.

“Huh, that’s surprising.”

“What is?”

“I mean, ya know, you’re such a listless person.”

He disagreed, but...not that strongly.

“I just figured you thought hard work was dumb.”

“If you laugh at the hard work of others, you’re a failure as a human being.”

“Hearing you say that is even more surprising.”

Nodoka seemed pretty happy, though.

“But if you feel like that, why don’t you do anything?”

“Like?”

“Like join a team and aim for the nationals. Maybe you wouldn’t look so sleepy all the time, then.”

“I ain’t arrogant enough to join any kind of team in the second term of my second year.”

He’d rather die than force his way into an existing community. They wouldn’t welcome him, either. And Sakuta was fine with looking sleepy.

“You don’t have the tact to care about *that*.”

“I actually do, believe it or not. And besides, I’m busy enough as is.”

“Liar.”

“I’m making food, cleaning the apartment, bath, and toilet, taking out the garbage, and doing the laundry.”

“That’s not the kind of work I mean!” Nodoka said, rolling her eyes at him.

Sakuta ignored her. “What, just because I don’t have fans cheering for me, you’re gonna say my hard work doesn’t count?”

“Also, that just makes it sound like you’re a mom.”

“Yeah. And I’m saying the moms of the world are amazing.”

“You are so *not*! Ugh, forget it.”

Nodoka snorted angrily, turning back toward the stage.

The idols were heading to the wings, waving as they left.

Sakuta had failed to make eye contact with Mai. He was pretty sure she knew they were here. She’d sent them the tickets, and here at the back, there was just enough space around them that they probably stood out from onstage.

But she didn’t look at him, because she was being Nodoka. She refused to let that act slip even now. Mai Sakurajima’s performance as Nodoka Toyohama was flawless perfection.

Except for one thing.

He’d been worried about this yesterday. Mai’s “Nodoka Toyohama” gave a better performance than the real thing.

Once they were all offstage, the crowd started chanting “Encore!”

Two hundred people yelling made a lot of noise.

This went on for a minute, and then the idols came running back out, dressed down in ordinary T-shirts.

They all had mics in their hands, but it didn't look like they were gonna sing.

"Sorry, we can't do an encore today!" Uzuki said, standing right in the middle. Was that normal? The crowd went, "Aww," but Uzuki just grinned.

"There's a good reason!" they all shouted together.

"Ohhh!" the fans roared, getting really hyped up.

"In grand Sweet Bullet tradition! We're gonna announce the center on our next single!"

Uzuki's proclamation made the crowd's voltage go through the roof. A thunder of cheers and applause. Fans calling out different girls' names.

A poker-faced woman came out of the wings. She was wearing the staff hoodie, so she must've been working the show. She handed Uzuki an envelope and quickly left the stage.

"If I'm the one announcing it, that means it isn't me!" Uzuki said, making a show of disappointment.

"You never know—they might have you announcing yourself, Zukki," the short-haired girl said sympathetically. She gave Uzuki a pat on the head. She seemed to be the one who looked after the group's emotional well-being.

Uzuki recovered. "Here goes!" she cried. She handed her mic to someone else and pulled a folded piece of paper out of the envelope. She opened it in her palm, glancing it over.

"Mm?" she said. Her head tilted to one side as if she was suddenly intrigued. She looked at it again. "Whoa," she said. Phony surprise.

"Uh, what's going on? You're scaring me!"

"Argh, Zukki! Hurry up!"

"What does 'Whoa' mean?!"

The other girls were looking nervous but excited.

"All righty!" Uzuki said.

Everyone straightened up. Their eyes closed, praying. Mai had her hands clasped together, raised all the way to her forehead. Just like Nodoka had in a video of an earlier concert.

"The center for the next single is..."

Uzuki paused dramatically. She took a big breath. Her voice echoed through the hushed crowd.

"...Dokaaaa!"

There was a moment of silence.

The idols and fans both took a moment to react. This was a first, and nobody knew how to respond.

But soon a chorus of “Ohhh!” swept through the crowd, then cheers, then a celebratory round of applause. Nodoka supporters all raised yellow glow sticks. The other fans all changed theirs to match. The whole room was suddenly yellow.

Onstage, “Nodoka Toyohama” was getting huge hugs from everyone else, celebrating her first center.

“I’m sure she convinced you all today! Doka was off the charts! You really saved me there! Thanks again!”

“You’ve really been on a roll, Doka!”

The whole group was nodding in agreement.

After that round of congratulations, “Nodoka Toyohama,” the center of their next single, stepped forward, said something about how hard she’d work, and then it was time to go.

“Thank you all so much for coming!”

All seven members bowed low. The curtain fell, and the concert was over.

But the electricity humming in the crowd wasn’t going anywhere.

They were slowly filing out, obeying the staff’s directions. In the lobby, Sakuta saw a massive line of Sweet Bullet fans.

“What’s this for?” he asked.

“That.” Nodoka pointed at the passage to the exit.

The members of Sweet Bullet were standing behind a narrow table, seeing their fans off. They gave high fives to everyone who came over.

“Wanna join ’em?”

“Mai would just pretend she doesn’t know me. No thanks.”

Whatever the reasons were, it would still suck. Just imagining it hurt.

Fans were all seizing their chance to talk directly to their favorites. “Good luck!” “I’m supporting you!” “I like you best!”

Sakuta saw someone he recognized in that line. A woman far older than Sweet Bullet’s other fans. Nodoka’s mom.

“This is good, this is good,” she said, taking her daughter’s hand, nodding. The corners of her eyes were glistening. “I’m so glad. You worked so hard.”

She looked both happy and relieved.

Someone on staff spoke to her, and she apologized to them and the fans around her and headed to the exit. She was soon out of sight.

But Nodoka had stopped in her tracks.

She stared in frozen silence at her mother.

“She was smiling... My mom was actually smiling...,” her voice rasped, her lips trembling.

“Well, she’s gotta smile sometimes.”

“...Never.”

Her voice was flat and low. All expression drained away.

“She has *never* looked like that with me.”

Her fists were balled up and shaking.

But that soon subsided. Before Sakuta could think of anything to say, Nodoka’s body drooped, like she’d just...given up.

“I should’ve known,” she croaked. The sound barely forcing its way out. “That’s who my mom is.”

Like a thin film of ice cracking.

“It’s all about her.” The cracking grew louder. “Mom only ever wanted *her*.”

Nodoka’s words went crashing through the layer of ice that had formed on the surface of the water in her heart. The light went out of her eyes. Nodoka was consumed by darkness.

Surrounded by the lingering passion of the concert, Nodoka sank into gloom.

2

On the way home, it was so quiet it felt like they’d dreamed the rush of the crowd. The heat of enthusiasm had died out completely, and he couldn’t find a trace of it anywhere.

Nodoka was acting like nothing had happened, like her mind was completely empty. She was just standing by the train doors, clearly dead inside. Nothing registered in her eyes. She had achieved true expressionlessness.

The crowded train made standing in silence easier, and since Nodoka didn’t even glance his way, he left her alone.

Neither said a word during the forty-five-minute ride from Shibuya to Fujisawa.

“Toyohama,” he said at the station as he pulled her out onto the platform. If he let her be, she’d probably ride that train as far as it would go.

They followed the flow of the crowd to the gates.

Habit took him toward the north exit. If he was headed home, that exit, by the electronics store, was fastest.

But he stopped after a few steps, realizing Nodoka was no longer with him.

He turned, frowning, and saw her headed toward the south exit. That led to the connecting passage that would bring her to the Odakyu Department Store and the Enoden Fujisawa Station.

“Can’t make this easy, huh?”

He caught up with her and took her arm.

"We live this way," he said, pointing behind them.

Nodoka didn't look up, didn't glance at him. He wasn't even sure she'd heard him. She was totally unresponsive.

After a long silence, she whispered, "I don't want to go home."

No life, no emotion, no energy. Like she was completely hollow inside.

"...I want to see the ocean."

Sakuta looked up at the electronic display showing the time for the next train. The clock next to it showed just past nine. It wasn't terribly late, but definitely not the usual time of day for hanging out at the beach.

"....."

But Nodoka was an empty shell right now, and he couldn't leave her alone. Even if he dragged her home, she'd probably just wander out again, and that could lead to real trouble.

"Okay. But not too long."

He let go of her hand, and they headed for the Enoden Fujisawa Station.

To get to the ocean, they could have gotten off at Enoshima Station. Beach season was over, but anyone could go whenever they wanted. The view from Benten Bridge was always amazing. But Sakuta elected not to go there.

You could also see the water from two stations farther down the line at Kamakura High School Station. The view from that station's platform was the best. But Sakuta didn't get off there, either.

The train kept chugging along the coast. He thought of several other stations that could take them to the water's edge, but in the end, Sakuta and Nodoka got off at the most familiar option: Shichirigahama Station.

The same little station they used every day on the way to Minegahara High.

It only takes two or three minutes to walk to the beach. Just leave the station, head south, and there you were.

They went down the gentle slope, past the one lone convenience store, and then got stuck at a red light. The one on Route 134. It usually kept them waiting for ages, but today they got a walk light pretty fast.

They crossed the road and went down the stairs to the beach.

There were only two days left in September. The temperature dropped the moment night fell. By the ocean, the breeze was crisp enough to make long sleeves seem appealing.

Sakuta moved closer to the water's edge, keeping one eye on

Nodoka.

The night sea, deep and dark.

Moonlight reflected off the surface, but that just made the depths all the more unfathomable.

Sakuta stopped just out of reach of the waves. But Nodoka's footsteps kept on going. She walked right past him, into the water, not caring that her shoes got soaked.

"Yo," he called.

But Nodoka didn't stop. She was going farther in. The water was up to her knees.

"Dammit!"

No mistaking the signs.

She was headed right into those depths.

Kicking up sand, Sakuta threw himself into the water. The waves lapped at his feet as he lunged after Nodoka.

"Wait!"

The churn of the surf swallowed up his voice.

By the time he finally caught up, the water was at chest height. Each passing wave rocked their bodies, lifting them up.

"Toyohama!"

He grabbed her shoulders, stopping her.

"Let go!"

Nodoka struggled as she tried to throw him off.

"What are you doing?!" He had to yell to be heard over the waves.

"I'm done!"

"Huh?"

"Finished!"

"You are not!"

"Let go of me! I said let me go, dumbass!"

"Who's being a dumbass here?! Shit!"

A shadow loomed over them. By the time he realized it was a wave, it was too late. There was nowhere to run. The wave broke over his head, and for a moment, he couldn't see a thing.

"Blegh!"

When his head surfaced, Nodoka was gone. She'd lost her balance and sunk beneath the water.

"Hey!"

"*Koff, hack...*"

Nodoka emerged, coughing. She'd swallowed a lot of water.

"N-no! No!"

Nodoka was thrashing violently. If she pushed straight down, she wouldn't have much issue righting herself, but the undertow dragging her feet out from under her had made her panic.

"I can't... I can't!"

She was spraying water everywhere, trying to keep herself floating. When she started to sink again, Sakuta grabbed her from behind and pulled her out of the water.

“You’re fine. Calm down.”

“No! I can’t! I don’t wanna!”

He shoved off the seafloor, pushing toward the beach. The lights of the cars on Route 134 guided him. The wave that crashed over their heads had made him lose all sense of direction. The sea was terrifying at night.

“No! I quit! Let go!”

“Can’t do that.”

“Just leave me be!”

“Like I said, I can’t do that!”

“What do you care?!”

“This is a real chickenshit way to test me!”

They were both yelling now, trying to be heard over the roar of the surf.

“You don’t need to do *this* to prove you matter!”

“?!”

“Don’t walk into the ocean when you know perfectly well I’m gonna save you! Dumbass!”

He’d managed to get them back to knee height. He was panting heavily.

“Shut up... Shut up!” Nodoka glared up at him, her face crumpling. “You only care because it’s her body!”

“Damn straight,” Sakuta said, sure she wouldn’t believe a denial. It was true anyway.

“Go to hell!”

“And after all those meals I cooked you, don’t pretend I don’t care!”

“Let go... Let go!”

But Sakuta had both hands locked around Nodoka’s wrists. No matter how much she thrashed, he wasn’t letting go.

“Just let go of me!”

“No way. If anything happened to you, Mai would be really sad.”

“?!”

Nodoka gasped. She stopped struggling, or moving at all.

“Why...?” she whispered, head down. “Why, why?”

Tears started falling into the ocean, mingling with the surf.

“It’s all about her. All anyone cares about is her! Nobody needs *me*!”

Nodoka was just letting all her emotions pour out.

“.....”

She looked up at him, and he felt she was locked in a desperate

battle with her own misery.

“Like I said, that ain’t true for Mai. If anything happened to you, it would destroy her. Don’t make me say it again.”

The same thing was almost certainly true for Nodoka’s mother, but he didn’t think she’d listen if he said that now.

“That’s not true!”

“It is.”

“She said she hated me!”

“That was the real lie.”

Strictly speaking, both emotions were likely true. It was a thorny mix.

“Do you have proof?” Nodoka asked, like an angry child. She likely thought this would defeat him. Kid logic could be real effective sometimes. But this time Sakuta had an answer ready.

“All right, I’ll prove it to you,” he said.

“Huh?” This seemed to rattle her.

“I’ve got evidence, and I’m happy to share it. Come with me.”

“H-hey!”

This approach had surprised her so much, all he had to do was give her arm a tug and she followed after him.

They went up the beach and stopped to squeeze out their wet clothes. As much as they could anyway. They dried their hair and bodies—to an extent—with the Sweet Bullet logo towels. Then they walked up to the main road.

Sakuta never once let go of Nodoka’s hand. Not letting her get away again.

They crossed the road, heading for the station. On the way, Sakuta found a taxi pulling out of the convenience store parking lot.

He waved an arm at it. The driver’s eyes met his. Even in the streetlights, their condition must have been obvious. Their hair and clothes were still wet. But the cab stopped for them anyway.

The back doors didn’t open, though. Instead, the driver’s-side door opened, and the driver got out.

“You can’t go swimming here!” he said. It was hard to tell if he was joking or not.

He opened the trunk and took out a tarp. He spread it out on the back seats.

“Okay, go ahead.” He waved them inside.

What a great person. It seemed like this wasn’t his first time. Maybe he got a lot of wet passengers.

“Thanks a lot,” Sakuta said and put Nodoka in first, sliding in after her. “We’re not going that far, I’m afraid...”

He told them how to get to his place.

The driver flicked the blinker on and pulled out.

At the first light, Nodoka said, "Hands."

"Mm?"

"We're good now, right?"

She was staring at the seat between them. Where their hands lay, still clasped together.

"You're gonna run again."

"We're in a car."

"How can I trust someone who threw herself in the ocean?"

"What are you even saying?" she grumbled, but she didn't try to shake him off. He wasn't holding her that tight, so she could dislodge herself if she really wanted to.

She stared out the window for a while.

"Didn't think it would be that warm," Nodoka murmured.

"My hand?"

"The ocean, dumbass."

With the fall of night, it was definitely verging on fall temperatures. Compared with that, the water still felt warm. Sakuta knew exactly why that was. He'd asked Rio about it before.

"The specific heat of water is higher than air."

"Huh?"

"Talking about the sea," Sakuta said, staring out the window.

"Specific heat is how much energy it takes to raise a gram one degree, right?"

"I'm amazed you know that."

"You brought it up!"

"True, but..."

Basically, water is just much harder to heat up than air, and that means it also takes longer to cool off. While the air temperature can change dramatically on a daily basis, the ocean slowly warms up and cools off over a considerably longer period of time. Warmed by the sun all summer, the ocean here didn't really hit autumnal temperatures until November. This was why surfing and other water sports were still quite popular, even in October.

The taxi reached their destination without further conversation.

Sakuta thanked the driver again and handed over some wet money.

They got out, and Sakuta turned Nodoka toward Mai's building. He opened the lock on the front door with the spare key.

He'd always had Nodoka buzz him in before, so this was actually his first time using it.

They took the elevator to the ninth floor. There he used the spare key a second time, on the door to her condo.

Inside, he took off his wet socks before venturing farther in. Nodoka followed suit, peeling off her wet tights.

Sakuta headed straight for the barely used tatami room. It faced the living room, separated by a set of sliding doors.

He brought Nodoka to the long cupboard at the back of the tatami room and gestured for her to open it.

“What?”

“Go on.”

“.....”

It was a very ordinary cupboard.

Nodoka gingerly reached for the drawer.

And found the cookie tin inside.

“.....”

Nodoka looked at him again, baffled.

“You’ll see if you open it.”

“Ugh.”

She reached for the dove cookie tin and placed it on the tatami. Then she pried the lid off.

“Oh...,” she gasped.

The tin was filled with envelopes. In all sorts of colors. Lots of them with really kiddie designs.

“.....”

Wordlessly, Nodoka went through the pile, one letter after another.

They were all addressed to Mai Sakurajima. The names at the top were written in kanji, with beautiful handwriting. The further she went, the more childish the scrawl became, and the ones at the bottom used clumsily written hiragana instead.

“These are my letters...”

The back of every letter had *Nodoka Toyohama*, in the same handwriting.

There were a lot of them. At a glance, there were more than fifty. Maybe even over a hundred.

“Why would she...?” Nodoka’s lips quivered. “I don’t get it.”

Sakuta thought she got it just fine. There were tears welling up in her eyes.

“I don’t get it,” she said again.

There was a sound from the entrance. The door opening. Sakuta had locked the door behind him, so there was only one other person it could be.

Nodoka didn’t seem to hear.

“Why...why...?”

She just kept repeating the word. Her mind reeling.

“Cause she was happy,” Sakuta said, picking up one of the letters. One of the hiragana ones.

“Why?” Nodoka asked, looking up at him.

“I was just a kid back then, too, so I don’t remember, but...Mai was crazy popular when she was a child actor, right?”

She was still popular, but when she first broke out on the screen, she was truly a part of the zeitgeist. She was on practically every show.

Not just TV series and movies—she appeared in a ton of commercials and as a guest on variety shows. Sakuta remembered her as this one little kid surrounded by grown-ups.

“That must have been dizzying. She needed support from somewhere.”

“.....”

“Aren’t you happy when you’re onstage and the fans are calling your name?”

“Of course I am.”

“Same thing. She was just happy to have someone who loved her.”

The letter he’d opened was packed with little Nodoka’s feelings. Overflowing with admiration for her older sister. Nodoka had written her thoughts on the TV show Mai starred in, the commercials that played during it, the movie poster she’d seen in town, even the variety shows.

You were so cool in all of them! I’m proud to have a sister like you.

The writing was childish, but that just made the sincere emotion all the more palpable.

“If you think this wouldn’t cheer up her, you must think Mai is *really* messed up.”

“But I didn’t...!”

Nodoka was desperately trying to deny it, but even she didn’t seem to know why.

Her emotions were more honest. Tears filled her eyes.

“I’m not *really* her sister!”

She couldn’t hold them back any longer.

“What are you even saying at this point?”

“You don’t understand! When I wrote this, I didn’t understand anything yet. Not the fact that my father remarried, or that she had a different mom...”

“Well, you were just a kid.”

“So ever since I figured it out, I’ve been scared. Scared of what that might all mean to her. It became so bad I couldn’t write her anymore.”

Nodoka’s face crumbled. She was shaking like a leaf.

“I just couldn’t...”

She bit her lip hard, trying to force the emotions back.

The shaking stopped.

He thought she said something, but her voice was so quiet he

couldn't make it out.

"Mm?"

"So frustrating..."

This time he caught it.

"You mean Mai?"

"You."

Nodoka wiped her eyes and glared up at him.

"Yeah?"

"Why do you know her better than I do?"

"Cause I love her."

"Like you're the only..."

"....."

"I mean..."

She couldn't finish the thought.

"It's a lot easier to say than 'I hate you.'"

"Sh-shut up!!"

"You feel the same way, right, Mai?" Sakuta asked, turning toward the living room.

"Huh?" Nodoka looked up. She hadn't noticed Mai come in.

"You are a man of no principles, Sakuta," Mai said, swinging around from behind the doorframe. She clearly didn't intend to keep hiding. She looked at Nodoka, then at the pile of letters. "Don't casually dig up people's treasure."

"...Why...?" Nodoka asked, sniffing.

Mai quietly stepped over the threshold and entered the tatami room.

"I remember these," Mai said, looking at the letters. "Back then...I remember feeling dizzy all the time. Mom put me in a theater troupe, and that got me a role in a TV show, and before I had time to realize, everything went crazy. I couldn't keep up."

She spoke softly.

"I was dragged from studio to studio, only coming home to sleep. And sometimes not even home, but to some hotel. I didn't even have time to watch the shows I was on."

Sakuta remembered how she had said she was so busy working she didn't even go to elementary school that often. She'd graduated without making any friends.

Mai took the stack of letters out of the tin and flipped through them.

"I didn't even know how much I was on TV. I had no idea, but suddenly everyone in the world knew who I was. It was creepy, sometimes. For a while there, life was like peering into a clouded mirror. Everyone talked about how great my work was, but I didn't know who any of them were...and that was all I thought about."

Mai chuckled at the memories.

“.....”

Nodoka just watched, looking ready to cry again.

“But while all that was going on, you were the only one different. When I first found out I had a sister, it *was* upsetting. But every time I did something, I got another letter from you. ‘You’re so cool.’ ‘You’re amazing.’ And every time I read that, it gave me the strength to think *I was cool*. If it was making Nodoka happy, then the hard work was worth it.”

“I... I just...”

“That’s how I learned to love my job.”

Mai turned to face Nodoka.

“So, Nodoka?”

“.....”

“Thank you.”

“?!”

“Thank you for becoming my sister.”

“Sis...” Tears sprang up in Nodoka’s eyes again. “...That’s not even fair.”

She didn’t even try to wipe them. She just let the emotions pour out.

“It’s too late to say that now!”

“.....”

“I wanted to work as hard as you! But you go and get a center number before me?! Why is my mom out there praising *you*?! I can’t believe this!”

“Well, I practiced,” Mai said. “I put in the work, every day.”

This made it worse.

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about! Everything you have to do, that you can’t quit no matter how hard it is—you just *do* it! Like those who can’t make it happen are to blame. I hate that awesome part of you!”

Before Nodoka could say another word, a crack echoed through the room.

Mai had delivered a powerful slap.

“Owww...”

But it was Sakuta’s cheek she’d hit. He could feel a throbbing pain spreading.

“Why me?” he asked. An obvious question. Nodoka was staring at Mai, too, half-surprised, half-scared.

“Sorry,” Mai said calmly. “That was just such an immature thing to say, I totally lost my cool.”

“Then hit her instead!”

Mai was mad at Nodoka, right?

“She’s got a fashion magazine shoot tomorrow. I can’t risk leaving a mark.”

“If you can think that far ahead, you haven’t actually lost your cool.”

“That’s why I said sorry.” Mai was acting like she was the wronged party. “You can handle a slap or two for my benefit.”

“Only if you make up for it later,” he suggested, rubbing his cheek.

“Fine, fine.”

It still hurt. This deserved a significant reward.

“This is what I’m talking about!” Nodoka said. “You’re soooo professional, you make it seem normal, and where does that leave me? Where?”

She collapsed to her knees.

“Uh, in Mai’s case, that’s the only way she knows how to do things.”

Mai gave him a look like he should butt out, but Sakuta pretended not to notice.

“I’m pretty sure this side of Mai is just...awkwardness.”

“Sakuta...”

That was a reproachful tone, but Sakuta ignored this, too.

“She’s the kinda girl who can cheerily neglect a boy she *just* started dating, right?” he said. “We didn’t get to do *anything* over summer vacation.”

“Wh-what’s your point, Sakuta?” Mai asked, suddenly shaken.

“Mai’s nothing more than a workaholic.”

“Is that what you think of me?”

“I mean, here I have my first ever girlfriend, and I’m all excited, while you just forget about me! Nobody normal could ever do that.”

Now he was complaining to her directly.

“Well, Nodoka and I...”

“No, no, I’m not *just* talking about that.”

“...You said you supported me working,” she said, sulking.

“There are limits.”

“M-maybe, but...”

She was actually backing down. Maybe there was a part of her that did feel self-conscious about it.

“But we’re talking about Toyohama now,” he said. “We’d better save this for later.”

Nodoka watched them, looking faintly surprised.

But then she suddenly snorted, like this was funny.

“Okay, maybe my sister isn’t perfect,” she said, her eyes moving from Sakuta to Mai and back again. “I mean, she’s clearly got lousy taste in men.”

She laughed pretty hard at that. Sakuta was hoping Mai would argue this point, but Mai didn't deign to say a word in his defense.

She just waited a moment and then said "Nodoka" quietly.

"....."

Nodoka looked up at her, suddenly tense. Her lips pressed tight together. No trace of her laughter left. All business now.

"It's time you unhook yourself from your mother," Mai scolded.

".....Huh?" Nodoka blinked at her.

Like she had no idea why Mai would say this.

"After the show, you saw your mom in line for a high five, right?"

"?! That's why I—!"

The emotions of that moment clearly came raging back up inside her.

"Her hand was shaking," Mai said, as calm as Nodoka wasn't.

"When I held your mother's hand, it was trembling."

Mai reached out and took Nodoka's hand, wrapping hers around it.

"I think she's been scared this whole time."

"Scared...?"

Once again, Nodoka didn't get what Mai was trying to say at all.

"Scared because she put you in the business and made you audition to be an idol. Even before that, when she put you in the theater troupe."

"I don't..."

"She was never sure that doing that would make you happy."

"Make me...happy?"

"You don't get it?"

Mai's voice was incredibly gentle.

"....."

Nodoka just stared at the ground, shaking her head. But it seemed like she *did* get it, on some level. Like she couldn't answer out loud because the idea had started to sink in.

"After seeing you desperately trying to live up to her expectations for so long, it's left her constantly afraid that you weren't actually happy."

"?! But, I didn't know—!"

Nodoka was reflexively trying to deny it, as if she felt like everything she believed to be true was crumbling away. She knocked over the pile of envelopes, and they scattered across the tatami. She didn't have it in her to pick them up. She just repeated "I didn't know, I didn't know," arms wrapped around herself. "She never said anything like that!"

"Well, you can't say that to your kid, can you?" Sakuta started picking up the envelopes, one at a time, carefully. These were Mai's

treasures. “They can’t tell their kids how scary being a parent is.”

When he’d met his dad the other day, he’d read between the lines.

“I don’t really see the problem, personally. Trying to live up to someone else’s expectations is a perfectly fine way to live.”

It wasn’t inherently wrong. If you chose that path yourself, that is. But you couldn’t blame your parents for it.

“I-it isn’t—”

Nodoka was still clinging to *something*.

“I chose—!”

“.....”

“I did...”

Ultimately, it was her own words that made it all fall into place. Nodoka’s voice got very quiet. The wind fell out of her sails.

“I mean... I... I... Mom was always angry. I just wanted her to be happy! All she ever talked about was you. I just wanted her to praise *me*! I just wanted to see her smile!”

She forced out the words, and the torrent of tears that came with them. It felt like they were finally seeing her true feelings.

“Then you just need to make her happy by doing what *you* choose to do.”

“.....”

“Not what your mom tells you to do.”

“Mm...mm...wahh...”

Nodoka was sobbing like a little kid now. Mai pulled her in for a hug. Gently patting her back.

“.....Sorry. I’m sorry, Mom...”

Nodoka cried her heart out in Mai’s arms. When the sobs finally died down, she raised her face.

“Sis...,” she said.

“Hmm?”

“I don’t have to be like you, right?”

That was what Nodoka’s mother had wanted her to be.

“You can be like me if you want to be.”

“I don’t!”

She jumped on that point so hard Mai’s eyebrow twitched. Nodoka didn’t notice. Mai recovered quickly, smiling gently. She seemed a little sad that she was no longer her sister’s goal in life, but what came through the most was how proud she was that her sister had started finding her own way.

Sakuta watched the sisters bonding, relieved—and then...

He blinked.

“Huh?”

When his eyes opened again, everything was different.

“W-wait...”

“Uh, what?”

Mai and Nodoka looked equally surprised. That was probably to be expected, since they were the ones who’d changed.

They’d switched bodies. No, that wasn’t quite right. It was true, but not exactly. In the instant that Sakuta’s eyes were closed, Mai and Nodoka had switched places. Nodoka Toyohama had been embracing Mai Sakurajima, but now Mai had her arms around Nodoka.

Problem was, their clothes hadn’t switched. Mai Sakurajima was wearing Nodoka’s clothes, and Nodoka Toyohama was wearing the outfit she’d picked to attend the concert. Only their bodies had switched places.

“We’re back?”

“I...guess?”

Mai and Nodoka patted themselves to be sure. Then they both stood up and raced to the washroom to check the mirror. “We are.” “We’re switched back!”

Sakuta came out into the living room, relieved. It seemed they were finally free of the body-swap Adolescence Syndrome.

He’d have to ask Rio for an explanation the next time he was at school. Seeing the swap happen had not provided him the enlightenment he wanted.

Honestly, he felt too tired to think about it now.

He yawned. Then a nearby phone vibrated. From the pocket of Mai’s bag, the one Nodoka had been carrying around. In other words, this was Mai’s phone.

He glanced at the screen and saw **Ryouko** on it. Mai’s manager.

“Mai, your phone’s ringing.”

Mai came rushing back, and he handed the phone to her. She answered immediately.

“Hi, Ryouko. This about the schedule for tomorrow?”

It had been a month since Mai had been “Mai.” It felt like ages. There was a clear difference between this Mai and the one Nodoka had pretended to be. This one was so self-assured. Overflowing with confidence.

“Huh? Wai—Really? Uh, right. Yes, sorry...that’s on me. Right.”

That confidence sure evaporated quick. Mai was frowning, looking grim. What was she accepting the blame for here?

Nodoka came out of the washroom, seeming worried. Clearly afraid she’d messed up somehow.

“Right, of course. Good-bye.”

Mai hung up. She quickly started poking at the screen. She didn’t complain when he peered over her shoulder.

She was doing a search for “Mai Sakurajima boyfriend.”

While the image data loaded, Nodoka shuffled to her other side.

And when the results came up...

"Ugh."

"Ah!"

"Huh?"

All three of them let out strange noises.

The screen showed a picture of Sakuta and Mai walking together. And not just one snapshot, either. Four of them, in multiple locations. On the station platform, walking home, on the beach together...

He knew instantly these were all recent shots. From the last month. All of them while Nodoka was in Mai's body.

"The agency is already getting questions."

Mai sounded a lot more composed than she had on the phone. Almost like she was enjoying this. Maybe she was hoping this would finally get the "no dates" rule lifted.

"S-sorry, Sis..." Nodoka seemed to be taking it pretty hard. "I don't know what to do..."

"You don't have to do a thing, Nodoka."

"But..."

"This isn't a problem."

Mai reached out and put her hand on Nodoka's head.

"Leave this one to me."

"...O-okay."

"Sakuta...well, sorry." She glanced his way, then dropped her eyes to the floor. "This is gonna be hell for a while."

"Well, I'm gonna squeeze a lot of favors out of you to make up for it, so I think I'll be okay."

"Fine. Once this is over, I'll give you that date you've been asking for," she promised.

Mai looked positively delighted.

3

"It seems like I've caused quite a commotion," Mai began, looking a little embarrassed.

Sakuta was watching her on TV.

This was a press conference announcing Mai Sakurajima's first lead role in a movie since her return from hiatus.

Actors and producers were on stools around a very bearded director. Nearly a dozen of them, from veterans to fresh faces.

But the cameras showed only Mai.

It was lunch break at school.

Sakuta was watching Mai's press conference on the TV in the

science lab. This time around, it was definitely his concern. Or rather, this was partly his fault.

No matter which channel he turned to, the midday news programs were all showing the live broadcast of this press conference.

Questions poured in from the reporters. Nothing about the movie. All about the photos on the Internet and the subsequent weekly magazine coverage of Mai Sakurajima's love life.

Nobody wanted to talk about anything else.

This was the first juicy gossip Mai had let them have. Given her level of popularity and fame, the story had a lot of traction. For days now, celebrity-gossip shows had discussed little else.

There was a persistent crowd of cameras outside her building, too. Sakuta was forced to sneak into his own apartment. Mai was left unable to attend school at all and had retreated to a hotel her agency booked for her.

That made this press conference the first time Mai had appeared on camera since their relationship had been discovered. There were an astonishing number of cameras in the room. All trained on Mai's face so as not to miss a single shift in her expression.

The news program's lead-in had said there were too many reporters to fit in the room.

Mai was calmly responding to the questions.

"Is it true you're in a relationship?"

"Yes, it is."

She still looked faintly abashed, but she openly admitted the truth.

"Can you tell us about him?"

"He's completely tactless."

Mai smiled, clearly joking. She didn't maintain this aplomb for long.

"How long have you been dating?"

"Um...for about three months."

"How did you meet?"

"Well, he asked me out in front of the whole school...and I didn't give him an answer right away, but he asked me every day for a whole month and eventually wore me down."

By the third question, she was hesitating slightly, and the fourth one had her picking her words carefully, clearly flustered.

Even through the TV Sakuta could tell she was blushing.

She didn't seem sure where to look.

"Mai, you've turned awfully red!" a female reporter pointed out. Clearly amused.

"It's my first boyfriend, and I'm talking about it in front of all these cameras! How can I not be a little embarrassed?"

Mai pursed her lips, sulking like a kid. Then she started fanning herself like it was really hot in there.

“You said *first* just now. Have you not dated any boys before?”

Mai winced, like she’d slipped up. She recovered quickly.

“The magazines have been writing about me for years, but this is the first time I can recall being able to *offer* you anything.”

She gave the reporters a reproachful look. Clearly trying to hide her shame with sarcasm. Her blush didn’t seem like an act.

And that had all the grown-ups smiling warmly.

Mai Sakurajima was very good at looking poised and mature. She took her work seriously and had earned herself considerable trust from cast and crew alike. But Mai Sakurajima was still in high school. She was just as capable of falling in love as any other girl her age—and they’d all just been reminded of that. This was quickly changing the mood of the room.

The more Mai blushed, the more the reporters sat up, on their best behavior. Their attitudes softened, their tones becoming more relaxed.

The questions quickly grew silly—in a good way.

“What do you like to call him, Mai?”

“Just his actual name...” Mai’s voice was a little quiet, and she trailed off into silence.

“No honorifics?”

“No... Er, is that unusual?”

She looked around her, gauging reactions. Suddenly worried this wasn’t what everyone did. The woman overseeing the press conference said, “Not at all,” and Mai looked relieved.

After that, she got questions like “What was your first impression of him?” or “If he was an animal, what would he be?” or “What’s your best memory with him?” The storm of questions showed no signs of abating. If anything, they were getting more worked up. The woman managing the room was starting to look alarmed. As well she might. They were *supposed* to be talking about this new movie.

“Can I cut in here?” Mai asked, interrupting her before she could take the next question.

“Yes, Mai? Go ahead.”

Mai held the mic as she stood up. She proceeded to apologize to the director and her costars for the uproar.

“The producer sounded delighted when he said you saved us a lot of work advertising the project, so go ahead and say whatever you like,” the director said. Clearly making a big joke of the whole thing.

“Y-you promised you wouldn’t tell Mai I said that!” yelped the suit next to him.

The comedian next to him jumped on that. “In show biz, ‘Don’t say that!’ means ‘Absolutely say that first chance you get.’”

“I guess I’ll be having a chat with my producer once this press conference is over,” Mai said, with a very intimidating smile.

The reporters all laughed. The director and actors were laughing, too. Only the producer was sweating.

When the laughter died down, Mai turned toward the cameras.

“My boyfriend is the reason I started working again. I’m sure he would disagree, but I firmly believe that if it weren’t for him, I would never have stood in front of a camera again.”

Her tone made it clear she was thinking back on events from a few months ago. But her face stayed red the whole time, still plainly embarrassed to be talking about Sakuta in front of all these cameras.

“This news has brought a lot of chaos down on his head. So much that I’m a little worried he’ll break up with me.”

The reporters seemed to not take this very seriously if their laughter was anything to go by.

“I’m only half joking!” she said, feigning anger.

This got another laugh. The room was definitely on her side no matter what now.

“As you’ve all no doubt gathered, he’s a normal boy and has nothing to do with the business. My privacy is one thing, but I would appreciate if you could avoid putting pictures of him in your magazines or anywhere online.”

The weeklies had all blurred the images. But people could still easily identify him and the locations if they knew what they were looking for.

The real problem was the Internet. A lawless territory at the best of times. The photos online were likely taken not by any professional paparazzi, but by ordinary people, just uploaded for a laugh. It never even occurred to most posters to blur anything. His pictures were already online and spreading.

Luckily, they were mostly long shots. He hadn’t seen any photos clear enough to make out his face yet. But there might be new pictures showing up any day now, which was definitely worrying. Those would make him instantly famous.

“If he does end up breaking up with me over this, I won’t be able to get you any updates on the status of our relationship, so I’d appreciate your help here.”

Just as the room had started getting serious, she made another joke and everyone relaxed. Good way to wrap things up. Ten years of handling the press had clearly taught her a lot.

“Nobody in Japan would be shameless enough to take someone’s picture and upload it on the Internet,” the director scoffed. This implied that the people who’d done just that were total scum.

At the bottom of the screen, there was a roll showing tweets from

viewers, tagged with the program name.

____ Nice one, Director! I'm gonna check this movie out!

____ So true. I'd hate for that to happen to me.

____ Super jealous of anyone who gets to date Mai Sakurajima, though.

____ Does Japan have no morals left?!

____ Um, excuse me! Mai Sakurajima is too cute today!

They went on like this. The number of people using the hashtag was skyrocketing.

And all of this made it harder for the reporters to ask any more questions. They'd pretty much asked everything anyway.

When the moderator checked, only one hand went up.

Sakuta knew her. He'd met her, talked to her several times. She worked for the station he was watching right now. Her name was Fumika Nanjou.

"Do you have anything you'd like to tell your boyfriend right now?" she asked.

Less a question, more a request. Mai responded with a mischievous grin.

"I'd prefer to do that in person."

Mai laughed at this herself. She looked a little embarrassed but genuinely happy.

After that, they finally got around to talking about the movie. Since it seemed like they were done with Mai's "affair," Sakuta turned off the TV.

"Sakurajima handled that well," Rio said. She'd been watching with him, in silence.

"Yep. I love her even more."

"You should be telling *her* that."

"I often do."

"...And how does she respond?"

"She tends to say 'Yeah, yeah' and brush it off."

"....."

"Mai is easily embarrassed."

"And you have no shame."

She had been the one to ask the question, but Rio had already lost interest. No, she probably never had any. She lit an alcohol burner and started warming water in a beaker. Probably making coffee.

"Oh yeah...what was all this about anyway?"

"What was what?"

"The two of them swapping bodies."

"Here." Rio handed him a book. The title was *Quantum Physics for Gorillas*.

He opened it to the front page. There was already a formula on it

he didn't understand.

"These are some damn smart primates."

He'd rather read a book about how clever gorillas were.

"And technically they *didn't* swap bodies," Rio said, blowing on her instant coffee.

"Yeah..."

When they'd gone back to normal, Mai had stopped looking like Nodoka Toyohama and returned to her true form. And Nodoka had stopped looking like Mai Sakurajima. Literally in the blink of an eye.

"Only their appearances changed."

"Yep."

"So?"

"The younger one wanted to be like her sister, *had* to be like her, and that perception caused her to physically transform into Mai Sakurajima."

"Sounds likely...but how?"

"Fundamentally, it's probably most appropriate to treat it as a form of quantum teleportation."

Rio took a sip, having cooled the coffee sufficiently. It smelled awfully good for the instant stuff.

"Please tell me more."

"I explained quantum teleportation before?"

"Yes."

She'd done that during summer vacation, when under the influence of Adolescence Syndrome herself.

He vaguely recalled it using a particularly nutty aspect of quanta called quantum entanglement. Rio had explained that the quantum blueprints that gave shape to Rio were synchronized with quanta elsewhere, disseminating information, and via the act of observation of a Rio in that location, teleportation was made possible.

It was way too sci-fi for him.

"So Sakurajima's sister made the blueprints of Sakurajima's body her own, and by observing herself, she obtained Sakurajima's body. I think."

"....."

"I'm not asking you to believe, and honestly, I don't really know myself."

Rio took a sip of coffee, apparently satisfied. Sakuta's opinion was of no concern, clearly.

"But isn't there a huge gap in that theory?"

"Sakurajima's side of things?"

Rio knew where he was going with this.

"Yeah. Why would Mai turn into Toyohama?"

"Because if she didn't, the world wouldn't be consistent."

“Huh?”

“If only her sister changed, then there’d be two Mai Sakurajimas. When there should only be one.”

“So?”

“So to maintain consistency, Sakurajima turned into her sister.”

“But there were two Futabas over summer vacation.”

“But in my case, it *was* consistent.”

“It was?”

“You never saw both of us at once, did you?”

“No...”

The most he’d ever managed was to speak with one on the phone while he was with the other. Like Rio said, he’d never seen the two of them together.

“Conservation laws are a fundamental concept in physics. If one thing increases, another decreases. If one thing decreases, another increases. If you assume the entire world follows that principle, then the moment her sister turned into Sakurajima, Sakurajima *had* to turn into her sister.”

“.....”

“If that still doesn’t make sense, maybe you should assume that Sakurajima was also at least somewhat jealous of her sister.”

“That makes more sense.”

He wasn’t entirely convinced, but digging any deeper into quantum stuff definitely wouldn’t help. He decided it was best to feign comprehension.

He pushed the gorilla book back toward Rio. As he did, the warning bell rang. Lunch was over in five. Time for afternoon classes.

“Right, I’m off to class.”

He stood up.

“Azusagawa,” Rio called after him.

“Mm?”

“You have a date after school, right?”

“Yeah.”

He was meeting Mai at Kamakura Station after the press conference ended. What of it?

“I’m sure you’d notice before then, but...maybe you should zip up your fly.”

He looked down. His Window to Society was yawning open.

“We should all be lucky to know girls who’ll point these things out.”

Rio wouldn’t meet his eye. She was staring awkwardly out the window. Perhaps she had discussed his crotch enough for one day.

“Just shut up and go already,” she said.

He zipped up and left the science room.

After school that day, Sakuta boarded the train going away from home.

Not to Fujisawa, but to Kamakura.

All the way to the end of the line, Kamakura Station. From Shichirigahama Station, he passed through Inamuragasaki, Gokurakuji, Hase, Yuigahama, and Wadazuka. The trip took around fifteen minutes total.

On this day in particular, that fifteen minutes felt eternal. Was it because he was headed for a date?

The train seemed to be going even slower than usual. He started wondering if they'd added extra stops. He knew they hadn't, but...

Just before Wadazuka, he started wondering if it would be faster to get off and run the rest of the way.

But despite his impatience, the train pulled into Kamakura Station exactly on time.

He was waiting by the doors and was the first person on the platform. He hustled past the souvenir stands, heading for the gates.

They'd agreed to meet at the station's west exit. Outside the gates, he turned right, to the square with the old station clock. It wasn't much of a square, so if the person you were meeting was there, you wouldn't have to look long.

Mai was not there.

He was twenty minutes early, so he had not expected her to be. The square's main landmark, the clock, showed 3:39. He glared up at it, willing it to be four already. But the clock stubbornly kept accurate time.

Five minutes passed. Slowly.

"Sakuta," said a voice behind him.

He swung around.

"You're staring at the clock... Were you waiting that long?"

Mai was dressed in street clothes, her heels clicking as she approached. A casual fall sweater and a knee-length skirt. Boots below that.

Light makeup that made her seem even more beautiful. Her hair was lightly bound into a fashionable braid. And she had a pair of thick-rimmed fake glasses on. Presumably a disguise.

"....."

He couldn't help but stare.

"Go on—spit it out."

"I told you before that dates mandate miniskirts with bare legs, right?"

"Try again."

"It's scary how cute you are."

Anyone who saw Mai would know instantly she was on a date.

“I’m thrilled you tried so hard for me.”

“Well...” Mai was very conspicuously looking away from him all of a sudden. “I said I had a date, and my hair and makeup artist got all fired up... I wasn’t actually planning on going this far.”

“Hmm.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Oh, more importantly, Sakuta...”

It was like she’d remembered something critical. The mood shifted instantly. That faint hint of embarrassment completely vanished.

“What?”

He had a hunch but decided to play dumb.

“Don’t you have something to say to me?” she asked.

“You’re super-beautiful today!”

“.....”

She reached out wordlessly and twisted his cheek. Quite hard.



“Ow, ow!”

When he kicked up a fuss, she let go. Then she took a magazine out of her bag and held it up in front of him, open to the lead article.

“What is *this*?”

Her lips were smiling, but her eyes sure weren’t.

“I have no idea!” he insisted. This earned him a foot stomp. “Not the heel!”

It was quite painful.

“Then look!”

“Okay.”

He did as he was told, focusing on the magazine. He knew perfectly well what it said without looking. It had been out for a few days, and he’d already read it.

The headline, in large letters, said, “Mai Sakurajima’s First Love?!” In other words, this was about Sakuta and Mai.

It had photos of them leaving school together and waving to each other outside the buildings.

The centerpiece was a long shot of the two of them by the ocean. This was actually a series of photos, which made it look like Mai had thrown herself on Sakuta, knocked him down, and kissed his cheek.

“Toyohama tripped, and I caught her. That’s all.”

Since he was there, he knew just how cleverly they’d manipulated this through omission. Taking just the choice shots to make it look like something else. The media were scary.

That was right after the commercial reshoot, so a reporter who’d heard about that must have stuck around afterward. These photos were taken with a very good camera and were quite high quality.

“And?”

Mai’s eyes still weren’t smiling.

“That’s it.”

“Did you?”

Unsurprisingly, Mai didn’t let it drop. He wasn’t getting out of this that easily.

“.....”

“Did you kiss?”

She made it very clear. No evasive euphemisms here.

“Mild contact,” he admitted.

“.....”

The silent pressure was formidable.

“It was an accident!”

“And you think that makes it okay?”

Mai was clearly annoyed. A shiver ran down his spine. Certainly, calling it an accident was not going to fly.

"I'm sorry," he said, bowing his head.

"You repent?"

"I do."

"I don't believe you."

"I swear!" He looked up, his desperation evident.

"Then demonstrate your fealty."

"How?"

"Figure that out yourself."

She looked away indignantly but kept stealing glances at him, clearly expectant.

Sakuta bent down and said, "Go ahead."

"And do what?"

"I just assumed you wanted to kiss my cheek."

"....."

The cold glare suggested this was the wrong choice.

"Uh..."

"Say anything weird, and I'm going home."

What a horrible threat.

"I love you."

"....."

Clearly not enough.

"I super love you."

"....."

Still no sign of forgiveness.

"Having you as my girlfriend is all I need to be happy. I am the happiest man in the world."

He kept his eyes on hers and caught a trace of a smile.

"Naturally," she said. She still sounded mad, but her expression said otherwise.

"And you?" he asked.

"Mm?"

"I was wondering how *you* feel."

He didn't think this tactic would work. He'd almost never managed to pry anything direct out of her. And the look in her eyes said, "You aren't tricking me into *that*."

"You did promise to reward me," Sakuta said, not backing down.

Mai sighed dramatically, but she didn't look all that annoyed. Then an idea struck her.

"Look, Sakuta."

"What?"

Their eyes met. There was a faint smile in hers.

"I think I love you a lot more than you realize."

"....."

It took him a moment to process that. His jaw dropped. This must

have been a bigger reaction than she'd expected, because she said, "What a face!" and started laughing.

"No, I'm confident I love you more!" he said.

"Sure, let's say you do. Come on!"

She grabbed his hand and started walking.

"And wipe that smirk off your face," she said.

"You're grinning yourself, Mai."

"And you love it," she said, her smile radiating confidence. *This* was the Mai he knew and loved.

"I'm so happy I want another date tomorrow."

"Can't. I've got a magazine shoot."

"Aww, more work?"

"It'll have to be the day after."

On that delightful note, they headed onto Komachi Street, a road lined with quaint little shops. Even on a weekday it was packed with tourists and couples.

Everyone was happily searching for souvenirs or eating food they'd just bought. There was a smile on every face.

Including Sakuta's and Mai's.



And the Fall brings...

After the press conference, the media storm around Sakuta and Mai died down pretty quick.

The flush of first love on Mai's cheeks had done the trick and made the public want to watch over her love life protectively.

As a result, when Mai came back to school a few days later, she was able to leave with Sakuta.

The commotion had not blown over completely. There were still new photos of Sakuta and Mai going up on social media.

But these posts were getting flamed by anyone who found them, and the users were quickly forced to abandon the accounts.

By the second week of October, the world had found some new gossip to care about, and Sakuta's life was back to normal.

The schedule for midterms was announced, and the menu at the restaurant changed to include new fall-themed dishes. Everything going on was normal life stuff, and entirely expected.

The only thing out of the ordinary was the phone call from Mai on Saturday night.

"Come over tomorrow," she'd said.

Tomorrow was Sunday, the twelfth. Mai had the day off.

He'd given her back the spare key, so this was a rare opportunity to see the inside of her place. And Nodoka had gone home.

That meant he and Mai would finally be alone together.

How could he not get excited?

Sakuta put on a fresh pair of underwear, just in case, and left the house. He buzzed the intercom at two PM, just like she'd said.

She let him in, and he rode the elevator to the ninth floor. When he reached the door to the corner condo, he rang her intercom.

He heard footsteps coming.

"Welcome," a girl said as she opened the door.

"Huh?" He blinked a couple times.

It wasn't Mai.

A very familiar blond girl was standing there. He knew her name. And he knew her career as an idol was just getting started.

"Why are you here, Toyohama?"

His excitement was fading quickly.

“She didn’t tell you?” Nodoka asked, adjusting the lay of her wide-necked T-shirt. She was wearing shorts below that, very casual. Her hair was done up with a scrunchie.

For once, her eye makeup was a little less dramatic. This was definitely an “at home” look.

“I haven’t heard a thing.”

“Aha. Well, that’s fine. Come in.”

Nodoka waved him in like she owned the place. Sakuta didn’t think this was “fine” at all, but there seemed no point standing around outside. He went in.

He took his shoes off and stepped up into the room. He looked down the hallway to the living room, and his suspicion became a certainty.

There was a stack of large boxes filling half the hall. Nearly a dozen of them, and the open box on top was filled with clothing far too flashy for Mai to wear.

Nodoka stopped beside them and said, “Move all of these into there.”

She slapped the side of the box pile, jerking her chin at the room next to them.

The room Mai never used. Effectively an empty room.

“You’re moving in?”

That much was obvious.

“She really didn’t tell you?” Nodoka turned toward the living room. “Sis!”

“I’m in here. Come help.” Mai called to them from the tatami room.

She emerged carrying a comforter in both hands. She was not visible behind it. The giant bedding entirely blocked the view. Mai didn’t seem to be able to see where she was going and was picking her way carefully.

Sakuta went over to her and took the fluffy comforter from her.

“Oh, Sakuta. Thanks. Put it in there.”

Like Nodoka, Mai gestured to the empty room.

“Okay, okay,” he said, adjusting his grip. He hauled over and spread it out on the brand-new bed—the only object in the room.

When he turned back, Mai and Nodoka were standing in the doorway, watching him work.

“Mai, what’s going on?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“Toyohama’s moving in?” he said, reluctant to put it in words.

“Yep,” Mai said.

“I thought you and your mom made up?”

He looked at Nodoka.

He definitely remembered her going home after getting her body back. She'd barely made the last train, but she'd said she had to get home and have a proper talk with her mom.

And Mai had told him things had worked out between them. Like, two days ago.

So why was she here now? This deserved an explanation.

"I get how Mom feels, and we talked about how I need to make my own choices, but..."

Nodoka shifted uncomfortable.

"But what?"

"People don't change that fast," she said, glaring at him.

"So even though you just made up, you already had another fight?"

"I mean, Mom is always this or that, do it this way, do it that way. She just can't stop meddling. It's obnoxious."

"...Look who's talking."

So much for happy endings.

But he also got what Nodoka was saying. Their relationship was so deeply in Mai's shadow that a single reconciliation wasn't realistically going to lead to a dramatic improvement.

It had taken them years to get where they were.

And old habits die hard. It would take a lot of time and effort to turn things around.

"So we talked it over, and Sis said, 'Why not live with me awhile?'" Nodoka slipped into an imitation of Mai halfway. She seemed pretty happy.

"It's a bit far from the dance studio, but basically the same distance from school," Mai added. Sakuta hadn't asked.

But this was some harsh medicine to help Nodoka's mom let go of her kid.

If she couldn't stop meddling even after they made up, then physical separation might be the right choice. Mai herself had started living on her own after a fight with her mother, so she probably had strong feelings on the subject.

"I went to Nodoka's house yesterday. We explained our goals clearly and said everything that needed to be said. Don't worry."

He hadn't been worried. His concerns lay entirely elsewhere.

"Aww," he said. In light of all of this.

"What?" Nodoka demanded, visibly annoyed.

"If there's someone else here, I can't flirt with Mai."

"Good!" Nodoka said, throwing her arms around Mai triumphantly.

"H-hey, Nodoka!"

Nodoka's face was buried in Mai's chest. But she shot a look back at Sakuta, like a challenge.

"I can do that, too!" Sakuta said and tried to grab Mai.

"Stay back!" Nodoka snarled, kicking him. Sakuta caught the kick with both hands. "Eek! Let go, dumbass!"

She thrashed her leg around, trying to shake him off, and managed to kick him in the stomach. He doubled over, clutching his gut.

"Damn, girl..."

Nodoka snorted as she tightened her grip on Mai.

"You need to wean yourself off Mai, sister-complex idol."

"Huh? I don't have a sister complex."

"Look in a mirror!"

Nodoka had her arms around Mai's waist and was clinging to her like a koala.

"There aren't any."

"Then don't look. Either way, Mai is mine. Let her go!"

"She's my sister!"

"If you two can't get along, I'll kick you *both* out."

"....."

"....."

They both turned their backs on each other.

"No more fighting. And get these boxes unpacked."

"Aww."

"Okaaay."

When they gave very different answers, Nodoka turned and glared at Sakuta. She was definitely treating this like a competition and was very fired up about it.

Life often didn't go as planned.

Sakuta and Mai finally resolved the Adolescence Syndrome and freed themselves from the clutches of that No Dating rule, but here was someone else hell-bent on getting in their way.

Life really never works out the way you want it to.

A chilly lesson on a crisp fall day.

Helping with the move itself was over in thirty minutes. It wasn't like Nodoka had anything big. After that, Mai asked Sakuta to help rearrange the living room. She'd decided to use this as an excuse to change things up.

The tiny dining table was replaced with a slightly larger one, to accommodate the addition of Nodoka. The one Mai had been using was placed on the side of the room, with a flower vase on it.

Between moving everything and cleaning, this took about an hour.

Sipping the tea Mai made for him, Sakuta looked up and saw the

clock hands pointing at four. Mai was in the kitchen, putting rice in the cooker.

When he glanced back, their eyes met.

"Staying for dinner?" she asked.

"I would love to, but Kaede's waiting."

"I thought you'd say that."

Mai had already measured out enough rice for two. She really *had* just asked as a courtesy. She added water, and the rice cooker was ready to start up.

"I'd better go," Sakuta said, getting up.

Mai walked him to the door.

"Thanks for helping," she said.

"Next time, let's make it just the two of us."

"Yeah, yeah."

She waved a hand, and he left.

Waiting alone at the elevator, he heard someone coming up behind him. She stopped next to Sakuta but said nothing.

"....."

He turned. It was Nodoka, all right.

"....."

Did she want to talk to him? He waited a moment, but she didn't say anything. Just watched the lights above the elevator.

The elevator arrived, and they got on without a word. And rode it all the way down in silence.

Sakuta had nothing to talk about, so he just headed toward his own building. It was right across the street. Less than a minute walk.

The moment he reached the other side...

"Don't just ignore me," Nodoka called after him, annoyed.

"What?" he said, turning back.

She was standing on the other side of the street, not meeting his eye. Her fingers were tangled up in the sleeve of her T-shirt, and she was fidgeting.

"Do you need the bathroom?"

"Of course not!"

He'd figured. She was old enough to go on her own, after all. Unless she had some weirdly specific fetish, that wouldn't be a reason to prevent him from going home.

"Then what?" he asked, not really caring.

"I haven't actually talked to you one-on-one since getting my body back."

She was still not looking at him. She started twirling her blond hair, clearly uncomfortable.

"Yeah, you were Mai the whole time."

"So, uh...that kinda makes it awkward, right?"

“Does it?”

“H-how could it not?” She looked annoyed.

“I dunno. Doesn’t really affect me.”

“.....”

Her glare grew more baleful, but the awkwardness showed, and she was looking up through her lashes. This was a sharp contrast with her outgoing vibe, and it struck him as funny.

“So? What do you actually want?”

She hadn’t come after him for this. She must’ve had something else on her mind.

“She said I had to say it.”

This sounded like a sulky excuse.

“So?”

“Uh...”

Nodoka looked away again. Without looking at him, she said, “Thanks.”

“For helping you move? No prob.”

“Not just for today. I mean...for everything. For helping me.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I do, though.”

“You don’t need to.”

“.....”

“.....”

“I think I kinda get it.”

“Huh?”

“Why she chose you.”

“Tell me more.”

“God no! You’re such a dumbass. And just ’cause I get it doesn’t mean *I* feel the same way or anything! Don’t get the wrong idea.”

He hadn’t suggested anything like that, but here she was turning red and vehemently denying it.

“I don’t!” She suddenly looked very serious. She was all over the place.

“Fine, I won’t get the wrong idea.”

“.....”

He’d done what she asked, but she still looked mad at him. Frowning, glaring...what did she want with him?

“...You could, a little.”

“Huh?”

“N-never mind! Don’t look at me!”

“Seriously, what do you even want?”

“Figure it out!” Nodoka spun around, muttering, “I mean, I definitely can’t beat her *here*.”

“What?”

“Just go home!”

She turned back once more and stuck out her tongue. Then she stomped off back inside.

“You’re the one who stopped me...”

But she was already out of sight and couldn’t hear him. He’d have to complain the next time they met. She’d be in Mai’s place, and he’d probably bump into her outside soon enough. Plenty of chances.

“We’re really gonna have to wean her off Mai, too...,” he muttered.

Then he turned around and went inside his own building.

He checked the mailbox on the first floor. Flyers for pizza and sushi joints. And a light-blue envelope he didn’t recognize. One that opened at the side.

“Mm?”

The envelope wasn’t sealed. Just folded closed.

No stamp or signs of post office processing.

No address or postal code.

All it said on the front was:

To: Sakuta

In round, feminine handwriting.

“.....”

Odd, he thought. He reached for the envelope. Inside was a single sheet of paper, folded in half.

He opened it slowly.

There was a short note scrawled on it.

When he read what was written, he grew even more baffled.

The letter said:

Can we meet at the beach at Shichirigahama tomorrow?

Shouko

Afterword

This is the fourth volume of the *Rascal* series.

The first volume was *Rascal Does Not Dream of Bunny Girl Senpai*, the second was *Rascal Does Not Dream of Petite Devil Kohai*, and the third was *Rascal Does Not Dream of Logical Witch*, so if this volume made you curious, I suggest you pick up those as well.

If you thought this was the first volume...I'm sorry.

Readers, if you see anyone about to fall for this trap, please let them know "*Bunny Girl Senpai* is the first volume!" Thanks in advance.

With that out of the way, I have good news.

I'm sure this will be advertised on the bellyband as well, but this series is receiving a manga adaptation!

Isn't that great?

As for the details...well, at the time I'm writing this, I don't have any!

By the time this volume is in stores, I'm sure the editors will have made a lot of decisions. Maybe the bellyband will have updated information!

Either way, I hope you look forward to that as well as Volume 5.

I am so grateful for the help of my illustrator, Keji Mizoguchi, and my editor, Araki, for their efforts creating this volume.

And I must thank all the readers who have followed me this far.

The next volume should be coming this fall...I think. See you then.

Hajime Kamoshida

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